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# The Western Balkans between two giants

A study concerning the relationship between the EU  
and China with the Western Balkans in the middle

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines how the relationship between the European Union and China can be interpreted, when focusing on their respective investments, projects, and influence in the six non-EU states of the Western Balkan. As a case study, this thesis can be regarded as a contribution to the existing scholarly debates and articles on topics about the relationship between the EU and China in different settings. In that matter, when considering the six states of the Western Balkan that aren't EU member states, the existing debates and papers are primarily centered around how the EU and China are influencing the states, whereas this paper intends to examine the EU-China relationship with the Western Balkans between them. This analysis was done, because the way that the EU and China are approaching these states, are rather different from each other.

In that matter, a theoretical discussion is the center of the analysis of this thesis, where neorealism, neoliberalism, and Complex Interdependence have made the foundation of the discussion. Furthermore, the work of the theoretical discussion will be done in accordance with two separate hypotheses. Thus, the first hypothesis will primarily focus on the assumption, that the relationship between the EU and China in this setting, can be regarded as a state of rivalry, whereas the second hypothesis will focus on the aspects of cooperation, international institutions, and interdependence between the EU and China. In that matter, the first hypothesis will primarily make use of the theory of neorealism, mainly with literature of John J. Mearsheimer, whereas the second hypothesis will make use of neoliberalism and complex interdependence, primarily with literature from John Ikenberry, Robert Keohane, and Joseph Nye. However, both hypotheses will make use of all the theories, and in that matter forming them into a theoretical discussion.

The analysis has shown that many of the main characteristics of these three theories are present, when considering the relationship between the EU and China with the six non-EU member states of the Western Balkan in the middle. The analysis did show that the relationship can be regarded differently, depending on which perspective the relationship is viewed from. The relationship from the EU's perspective seems to follow some of the neorealists assumptions, whereas the relationship from the Chinese perspective show characteristics of neoliberalism and Complex Interdependence.

In that matter, this thesis might be able to contribute to the ongoing debates, and maybe spark a light on future debates on the relationship between the EU and China, when focusing on their contributions and influence in the states of the Western Balkan.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and China is comprehensive and consists of several different aspects, such as trade and economy, politics, bilateral agreements, and much more. However, the relationship between the EU and China is not only determined by bilateral politics and agreements, the relationship between the two can also be influenced by Chinese or European actions in other countries or regions. In that matter, the main focus of this project is how the relationship between the EU and China can be interpreted, when considering their actions in the six non-EU member states of the Western Balkan region in Europe. These states are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, which will be referred to as 'WB6'. The relationship between the EU and China is interesting to take a look upon, in the just mentioned case, because they both have projects and investments in the six states. However, the way that they are doing projects and investments are completely different. When it comes to the EU, the projects and investments come with different requirements to the WB6, which are set in accordance with the requirements of joining the EU. This is important, as the EU have the goal of the WB6 to become member states of the EU in the future. This is, among other, visible through a statement done by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who at the EU-Western Balkan summit in 2021 said: "(...) We want the Western Balkans in the European Union, there can be no doubt<sup>1</sup>". Then, when considering the actions, projects, and investments of China in the WB6, it might be something that can influence the relationship between the EU and China. It is so, because the EU and China does have some fundamental differences regarding political and economic worldviews. That being said, China has over the last 10-20 years invested huge amounts of finances in the Western Balkan countries (but also other regions in the world), primarily in infrastructure-, energy, and telecommunication projects. These projects are often associated with their infrastructure project called 'Road and Belt initiative' (BRI), which is enhancing the infrastructure connections between China and Europe, and thus also trade. Whereas the projects and investments from the EU come with several different demands and requirements, the Chinese projects does not seem to have these sorts of demands, that the WB6 must follow. Most of the investments are held out as loans to the WB6. This is the main point of this project. The Western Balkan in the middle of two giants, and how the respectively actions and investments in the states are influencing the relationship between the EU and China in this situation. In that matter, a theoretical discussion is setting the stage as the analysis of this project, which is carried by two hypotheses that both represents the chosen theories of this project. The

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<sup>1</sup> Feore, Catherine. 2021. 'We want the Western Balkans in the European Union, there can be no doubt' von der Leyen. Eureporter. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://www.eureporter.co/world/western-balkans/2021/10/06/we-want-the-western-balkans-in-the-european-union-there-can-be-no-doubt-von-der-leyen/>

goal of the theoretical discussion is to find arguments for and against, that the relationship between the EU and China, when it comes to the WB6, can be regarded as a state of rivalry or if the relationship between the two actors is a result of the liberal international order. The theories that will help with the argumentations for and against are neorealism, neoliberalism, and complex interdependence. Here, neorealism will primarily present the pessimistic argumentation, that the relationship between the two actors can be regarded as a state of rivalry, whereas the two other theories will try to explain a more positive argumentation, that the actions through the two actors to the WB6 can be explained through the liberal international order, and that the interdependence between the actors is complex and a not necessarily a state of rivalry. This will all be possible with the help of different sets of data, which all have the purpose of supporting the argumentations in the analysis. This will be statements from leaders of the concerned states in relation to the projects and investments, which can give an indication of how the actors regard each other in correlation with the projects and influence. Of course, data about the different projects will be implemented, how they are done, how much money is spent, and which kind of requirements are related to them. In that matter, these different projects from the EU and China, the actors' perceptions of each other, and an introduction to European enlargement policies will be further introduced later in an overview chapter of this project. These two 'giants', that both have different visions and goals regarding the WB6 has made me curious to how the relationship between the EU and China can be regarded, when only considering their actions in the WB6. Can it be regarded as a state of rivalry? Are both actors concerned about the others influence in the WB6? Are the EU and China even cooperating in certain aspects of the WB6? These are some of the questions which is intended to be further investigated in this project. In that matter, the research question of this project is:

*Are the EU and China in a state of rivalry over the WB6? Or can the difference of involvement from the two actors be regarded as mutual indifference, or can the involvement and investments even be considered as cooperation between the two of them?*

## 2. Methodology

This chapter intends to provide insight into the methodological considerations of this thesis. This includes the objective of the thesis, the overall structure and design of the thesis, the chosen theories and the applications of them, the choice of data, and the limitations to the thesis.

## 2.1 The objective of the thesis

In the opening research for literature to this thesis, it was discovered that most of the papers written about China and the WB6, primarily were centered around the rise of China, and how they could increase their economic success across their own borders. Furthermore, some papers have also been focusing on the relationship between the WB6 and the EU, where many of the papers have been centered around that the process of EU-accession and EU-integration in these states has been 'too slow'. However, the research concerning the relationship between the EU and China, when considering the WB6, are rather limited. On one side is the EU, who has stated that the WB6 'someday' will become EU member states<sup>2</sup>, and on the other side is the economic power of China, with fundamental different world views as the EU, who invest in the WB6<sup>3</sup>. The investments from the EU and China comes with fundamentally different requirements, where the EU focusses on the development of values such as freedom and democracy, whereas China offers the WB6 loans with no requirements on values. These two sides and the WB6 in the middle, has created a sort of curiosity to how this scenario can be interpreted. Can the relationship between the two actors be regarded as some sort of rivalry to have the most influence in the WB6, or the threat of the other part having too much influence? Or is the involvement from both sides just a result of the liberal world with cooperation and interdependence? Thus, this project aims to uncover how the relationship between the EU and China can be regarded, when considering their bilateral relationship with the WB6 and the influence of the EU and China in these states.

## 2.2 The research design

The research design, or the structure of this thesis is based upon a theoretical discussion, which will be verified by an empirical analysis with two hypotheses as its foundation. This will be done in accordance with the objective of this research and the research question of this thesis, which is:

*Are the EU and China in a state of rivalry over the WB6? Or can the difference of involvement from the two actors be regarded as mutual indifference, or can the involvement and investments even be considered as cooperation between the two of them?*

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<sup>2</sup> Emmott, Robin. 2021. EU no longer agrees on Balkan membership guarantee, diplomats say. Reuters. Accessed 2022 March 23. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-no-longer-agrees-balkan-membership-guarantee-diplomats-say-2021-09-28/>

<sup>3</sup> Stojkovski, Bojan. 2021. *China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost*. Balkaninsight. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>

Because several actors are analyzed, this study can be regarded as an embedded case study, which is characterized as a case study with more than one actor<sup>4</sup>. An advantage of a research based on a case study, is that one specific case, which in this thesis is a group of countries and the relationship between them, can be intensively researched upon, even if resources from an investigator's disposal can be relatively limited. In contrary, a disadvantage of a case study, is that it can constitute neither a basis for valid generalization nor the ground for disapproving an established generalization<sup>5</sup>. However, a case study can make an important contribution to the establishment of general proposition and thus a contribution to the theory-building in political science<sup>6</sup>.

In that matter, this case study is guided by a theoretical discussion, consisting of two of the main international relations theories, namely neorealism and neoliberalism. In addition to these two theories, the theory of Complex Interdependence will also be used. These three theories will be used in terms of explaining, if the relationship between the EU and China can be understood as a rivalry or if it can be seen as a part of the interacting and cooperative world, when considering their relationship and contributions to the states of the WB6. These theories are used independently and in correlation with each other as tools in the empirical analysis, with the applied data which serves to verify the theoretical assumptions and discussions about the relationship between the EU and China.

Here, the theory of neorealism will primarily be used to explain the relationship as a state of rivalry and conflict, whereas neoliberalism and complex interdependence will focus on explaining the relationship in terms of cooperation and interdependence. Hence, the theoretical discussion will be based upon two hypotheses, which lay the foundation of the theoretical discussion. The first part of the analysis will be based on the following hypothesis: *The economic influence in the WB6 from China and the EU can be regarded as a rivalry*. This part of the analysis will primarily make use of the neorealist theory, which argues that conflict and rivalry can be regarded as normal in global politics. However, if the two additional theories can have an impact on this hypothesis, they will be used, hence the theoretical discussion. To answer this hypothesis, and in accordance with the research question, the data to research this would, among other, be projects that China has invested in, in the WB6. Additionally, data that shows EU investments and involvement in the WB6 will be used, to compare and interpret, how the two actors are influencing the WB6. Furthermore, official statements will be drawn into the analysis as well, to interpret what officials from the EU, China, and the WB6 are saying to the influence. This could be statements from the European Parliament, the European

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<sup>4</sup> Scholz, Roland W.; Tietje, Olaf. 2002. *Embedded case study methods: integrating quantitative and qualitative knowledge*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications

<sup>5</sup> Lijphart, Arend. 1971. *Comparative Politics and the comparative method*. In: *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 65, No. 3 (1971), pp. 682-693.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Commission, leaders of the states, and statements in the media, which could give the indication, if the spokespersons regard the relationship as a rivalry, or not. The second hypothesis, which will be the foundation for the second part of the analysis is: *The economic and political influence in the WB6 from the EU and China is a state of the free and liberal world order*. This part of the analysis will primarily make use of the theories of neoliberalism and complex interdependence, as it can be regarded as the opposite of the first hypothesis. In addition, the theory of neorealism will also be used here, to make it a theoretical discussion. For this hypothesis, official statements will also be used as data, as well as economic statistics. However, this hypothesis might need data, that show that the EU and China are cooperating in some aspects of the WB6, as well as in completely different issues. In that matter, data from international institutions will be used. This will be institutions, in which all the actors of this project are members of. In addition to that, the main objectives, goals, and norms of these institutions can be regarded as data, as they tell if the members are following the rules, or not. Lastly, to end this section, this research can be regarded as deductive research, using the three theories of neorealism, neoliberalism, and complex interdependence to answer the research question.

### 2.3 The chosen theories and the application of them

This thesis intends to analyze if the relationship between the EU and China, when it comes to their actions in the WB6, can be regarded as a state of rivalry, or if the relationship is based upon the liberal and interdependent world. In that matter, the theoretical framework of this thesis is two-pointed (two and a half) and will be visible throughout the whole analysis. Neoliberalism, and mainly from the perspective and literature of the liberal scholar G. John Ikenberry, is applied in this thesis to conceptualize liberal institutionalism and the interdependent world. This theory will be used to argue that the relationship between the EU and China over the WB6 can be regarded as a result of the liberal world. Furthermore, to help analyzing this case, the theory of Complex Interdependence has been chosen. The theory was created by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, and it is based on their book 'Power and Interdependence'. The book was originally published in 1977 but has since then been revised multiple times. This theory will help to analyze the interdependent aspect of the actors, but in more than just economic factors. Lastly the theory of neorealism, which can be regarded as a counterpart to supplement and challenge the theory of neoliberalism, will be used. In this thesis, literature mainly from the neorealist scholar John Mearsheimer will be used. The theory of neorealism primarily focuses on conflict and rivalry in the world of global politics, whereas the theory of neoliberalism fundamentally believes in cooperation. With that in mind, neorealism will be used to analyze if the relationship between the EU and China over the WB6 can be understood as a state of rivalry. Finally, the different theories are chosen in order to conceptualize different aspects of the

relationship between the EU and China over the WB6, and especially the chosen theories of mine, because they can be regarded as a counterpart to each other. The three chosen theories will be further explained in the theory section.

## 2.4 Choice and use of data

In this thesis different types of data will be used. This will be both qualitative- and quantitative data. Thus, this thesis can be regarded as hybrid research when it comes to data. An advantage of using both qualitative and quantitative sets of data can be, that these sets of data can complement each other and give a more comprehensive answer to the research question. The qualitative data will consist of several sets, among other country reports of the WB6 made by the European Commission. These reports consist of several themes, which can give a good insight of how the EU sees the progress of European integration in these countries. These annual country reports might also include the Chinese influence in the WB6, and in that matter, it might be possible to interpret how the EU regards the influence of China. In addition to that, official statements by leaders of the EU, China, and the WB6 will be used as data. This will both be statements in the bilateral regards from the EU to the WB6, such as China to the WB6, but will also be statements regarding the behavior of the two main actors towards the WB6. These statements can help to contribute to the theoretical discussion. They will be drawn from the media, from discussions within the European Parliament, European Commission, and official statements from leaders of the countries within this project. All these sets qualitative data such as the reports and the statements will be backed by quantitative data, which among other will be statistics of how much has been invested in the WB6 throughout the years from the EU and China. It will not only be economic statistics, but also statistics about the progress of EU integration in the WB6. These economic statistics will primarily come from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The statistics regarding progress in e.g., freedom, rule of law, and democracy will among other come from the databases of [freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org), World Justice Project (WJP), and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

## 2.5 Limitations

Since I neither comprehend the Chinese language, nor the languages spoken in the WB6, I am dependent on English and Danish (or German to some extent) translations on possible official statements from Chinese and WB6 leaders, who have addressed the activities of the EU and China, and vice versa. Luckily, most of the material from the EU-perspective are in English, so the 'points', where I must be dependent on translation, is the part between China and the WB6, but also when Western Balkan leaders speak about the EU influence in the region. In addition to this, it must be mentioned, that if I were to find some material only in Chinese, or a language of the WB6, I would have to use an online translation tool, such as 'google translator'. However,

these translations are not always made in a successful way, which mean that they cannot be understood completely as the originally written or spoken word. Furthermore, the data analyzed will primarily be statistics and statements from officials, which means that public opinion won't be regarded as a high priority in this thesis, even though public opinions often is a strong indicator of which direction a state is going. The data analyzed will be from around the year of 2010 and forward. I as the author of this thesis acknowledge that there have been Chinese and European activities and influence in the region prior to that, but the main target of this thesis is to analyze data from 2010 and forward. However, earlier activities would be able to be introduced in an historic way, in order to set the stage and to understand how and why powers like the EU and China want to influence the region, but it will not be analyzed. Lastly, only influence and investment in the WB6 from China and the EU will be analyzed and presented in this thesis. However, I do acknowledge that other powers have been doing activities and investments in the region, to forward their interests. This is, among other, Russia, who has a strong relation with some of the states. However, this thesis only focuses on the Chinese and European influence, mainly because of my own interest in the EU, the WB6, and the impressive rise of China.

As the writing of this thesis, and the search for literature and data progressed, I realized that the amount of data and literature from the EU-perspective were relatively larger than from the Chinese-perspective. Thus, as mentioned in *choice and use of data*, I wanted to use official statements, in order to analyze how the relationship between the two 'giants' of this projects could be regarded. However, as just mentioned, the limited number of official statements from the Chinese point of view, which could be statements towards their influence in the WB6, or how the Chinese perceive the projects and initiatives from the EU-side in WB6, has made it relatively 'difficult' to analyze, how China is regarding the relationship between them and the EU. In that matter, it must be mentioned before the reader starts reading the thesis, that the majority of data of official statements have been from the EUs and the WB6s perspectives. Why official Chinese statements have been difficult to find, might be because of several reasons. One might be the language barrier, another could be, that the EU to some degree might be more transparent and 'open', in terms of their actions and the reasoning behind them. The transparency of the EU, China, and the WB6 is not to be analyzed, but I am mentioning it, because it might have been a factor, why the data of the Chinese-side have been rather difficult to find. However, some statements have been found, which will be analyzed together with other factors which can argue for the Chinese perspective.

Finally, these were the methodological considerations of this project. The next chapter will introduce the chosen theories of this project and their main characteristics.

### 3. Theory

This section will present the chosen theories of this project. The theories are neorealism, neoliberalism, and complex interdependence.

#### 3.1 Neorealism

Neorealism, also known as structural realism, is promoting a pessimistic world view, as it argues that conflict, warfare, and rivalry are linked to the structure of the global system<sup>7</sup>. This pessimistic world view is a contrary to the world view of neoliberalism, where cooperation is considered one of the most important factors. The theory of neoliberalism will be introduced in the next chapter.

Neorealism is a broadly discussed theory, and many different aspects of the theory vary, but five main assumptions are a constant. The first assumption is that the international system is anarchic, because no overall government or central authority exist. Secondly, neorealists argue that all states possess offensive military power, which to some degree give states the possibility to harm one another. This ties well together with the third assumption, which is, that the intentions of other states are uncertain. Here, an example could be, that a state is uncertain, what another state might do with their military power. The fourth assumption of neorealism is, that all states seek to survive and maintain as much sovereignty as possible. The last, and fifth main assumption of neorealism, is that all states are rational actors that statically calculate their actions to survive<sup>8</sup>. Here it is important to mention, that some of the arguments tie well together with the next theory of neoliberalism. This is, among other, that the world is anarchic and that states are rational actors. However, it is the intentions of states that is different from the two theories. This will be further explained in the next chapter. In addition to the five main assumptions of neorealism, the theory also has three essential features, which is *statism, survival, and self-help*<sup>9</sup>. Statism refers to the realist assumptions that sovereign states are the main actors of international politics, and that all states share the interest of survival. Furthermore, neorealists assume that there is no higher authority than the use of force in the international system. For that reason, the possibility of war is always to be considered, as there is nothing preventing powerful states from using force, which can be military force. For that reason, security can only be realized through the term of self-help<sup>10</sup>. Because the theory of neorealism assumes that states are driven by motives, generally self-interested motives, states compete with each other to maximize their relative gains, which as an example

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<sup>7</sup> De Buck, Denise and Madeleine O. Hosli. 2020. Traditional Theories of International Relations. In *The Changing Global Order: Challenges and Prospects*, edited by Madeleine O. Hosli and Joren Selleslaghs: p. 6-7

<sup>8</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics: Updated Edition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 30-32

<sup>9</sup> Dunne, Tim. 2020. "Realism". In *The Globalization of World Politics: In An Introduction to International Relations*. Eight edition. edited by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens: 130-144. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 138-140

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

can be economic relative gains. Relative gains are where states always compare their power accumulations in *relative* to what other states have gained of power<sup>11</sup>. The main reason, why states are striving and compete for as much gains as possible, is for them to achieve as much power as possible. This ties to the neorealist assumption, that the more power a nation has, the more likely the state is to survive. Furthermore, this is a main difference of neorealism and neoliberalism, where states in both theories are driven by self-interest goals, but in neoliberalism, states are primarily more concerned about absolute gain – which will be touched upon later.

The neorealist view upon international institutions, which play a huge role in international politics, is mostly that the institutions are governed by the greater powers within the institutions, for them to control the less powerful states within the institutions. John J. Mearsheimer, an American neorealist scholar, defines international institutions as: “(...) effectively rules that the great powers devise and agree to follow, because they believe that obeying those rules is in their interest. The rules prescribe acceptable kinds of behavior and proscribe unacceptable forms of behavior<sup>12</sup>”. Thus, Mearsheimer argues that the great powers write the rules of the institutions, in ways that suit their interests. In contrary to neoliberalism, which argues that open trade is a must for development and economic growth, neorealists tend to assume that cooperation between states is a difficult task, primarily because of the mistrust among states and that states strive for relative gains. In addition to that, if a state estimate that a ‘partner-state’ reaches greater gains, the state might exit from an agreement, because of the state sees that as a threat to the strive for relative gains. An example can be the American withdrawal from the Joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. The US under the Trump administration, withdrew from the agreement, as the administration argued that the US didn’t achieve anything from the agreement<sup>13</sup>. Another example of a state withdrawing from an ‘agreement’, can be when Great Britain decided to leave the EU, commonly known as ‘Brexit’.

Neorealism also tends to have a pessimistic view upon multilateral cooperation, which is based on shared norms, values, and principles. Neorealists, as touched upon earlier, tend to assume that there exists a degree of mistrust between states. For that reason, the theory argues that states might cheat in cooperation based on shared norms etc., which ultimately hinders states from entering these kinds of collaborations. This could, among other, be that states cheat about their level of rule of law, democracy, freedom etc.<sup>14</sup>. This is a huge

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<sup>11</sup> De Buck and Hosli, 2020, op. cit., p. 7-8

<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. 2019. “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order”. *International Security*. vol. 43, nr. 4: 7-50.

<sup>13</sup> Lander, Mark. 2018. *Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal he Long Scored*. New York Times. Accessed March 18, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>

<sup>14</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. 1994-1995. “The False Promise of International Institutions.” *International Security*, vol. 19, nr. 3: 5-49, p. 13

contrast to neoliberalism, which soon will be introduced, where cooperation based on norms, values, and principles is a major component. Thus, this theory is applied throughout this project as a contrast and a supplement to neoliberalism, which has a different view upon the world structure, cooperation, security, and rivalry.

In the light of neorealism, it could be expected that the situation between China and the EU over the WB6 could be regarded as a state of rivalry. It could be seen as a state of rivalry, where the two powers battle over getting the most amount of influence in the region of the Western Balkan, in order to acquire the states as allies for the future, and at the same time trying to eliminate the influence of the other power. This could, among other, be in situations where China or the EU would grant the WB6 market access, cheap credits, security, or other factors.

### 3.2 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is one of the main theories of international relations. The neoliberal approach of international relations has its roots from the traditional theory of liberalism, although it has some different characteristics. The first, and one of the more important differences of the two theories is, where traditional liberalist theory never really addressed the question of anarchy in the international system, neoliberalism accepts the realist proposition. Thus, neoliberals agree with the neorealist argument, that the international system is anarchic, but they reject the realist and neorealist assertions that the anarchic world necessarily leads to conflict. Instead of conflict, neoliberals emphasize the importance of cooperation in global politics in an anarchic world. According to neoliberals, international institutions play an enormous role in structuring the international environment, in ways that mitigates against anarchy<sup>15</sup>. Because of the role that international institution plays in the theory of neoliberalism, the theory is often referred to as neoliberal institutionalism<sup>16</sup>. This is also a point, where neoliberal theory stands out from traditional liberal IR theory. Traditional liberal IR theory argues that the individual persons are the most important actors of global politics. By contrast, neoliberal theory tends to accept the realist assertion that states are the most important actors of global politics. However, neoliberal theory also adds the international institutions under this category, as a form of collection of states. The theory accepts the realist argument that states are rational actors, who pursuit their own defined goals, but this can also be collective goals. Additionally, neoliberals

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<sup>15</sup> Keohane, Robert. O. 1984. *After Hegemony. Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> De Buck and Hosli. 2020, op. cit. p. 3-21

argue that interdependence between states is important in the prevention of conflicts between states<sup>17</sup>. The term of interdependence will be further discussed in the next section of 'complex interdependence'.

Neoliberalism can be thought of as having three different dimensions. A social-, economic-, and a political dimension. The social dimension, which holds that as people from different states get in greater contact with each other, they understand one another more, and in that matter become less supportive of war. The opening of cultural expression and exchange, and furthermore the discovery of shared values and beliefs, reduces animosity between states or groups of people. This belief of exchange and discovery of shared values and norms, are not very different from the thoughts of traditional liberal IR theory. In the economic dimension, neoliberalism stresses the importance of trade relations between states. It stresses this for a couple of reasons. First, politically, close economic ties between states reduce the likelihood of conflict between them. Secondly, neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of free trade as a powerful avenue for economic growth and development. Finally, the political dimension of neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of international institutions in maintaining peace. This is institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Furthermore, these institutions encourage communications and dialogue between states, which give states a room to negotiate their differences. Thus, this aspect of communication makes states know one another better. The institutions do also promote transparency in the interactions between states and in the agreements that they negotiate. Additionally, the international institutions help to shape international norms and principles, which offer stability and predictability in international politics, this is pointed out by G. John Ikenberry, who is a neoliberal scholar. About international institutions, Ikenberry states: "Rule and institutions facilitate cooperation and create capacities for states to make good on their domestic obligations"<sup>18</sup>. Thus, because of the importance the international institutions have in the world, they can be regarded as a characterization of what is called the liberal international order. Ikenberry, who was mentioned before, defines the liberal international order as relatively open, loosely rule-based, and progressive. He further argues that the order is easy for states to join, but difficult to leave because of the interdependence that the institutions create through the social, economic, and political dimensions<sup>19</sup>.

In summary, neoliberalism is a theory of international relations, focusing on cooperation between states through different dimensions such as economy, politics, and social aspects. These aspects of cooperation are often facilitated through international institutions, which as examples can be the UN and WTO. Additionally, these international institutions are a major part and play a huge importance of this theory, which is why it is

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<sup>17</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2020. *The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less*. Foreign Affairs, vol. 99, nr. 4: 133-142

<sup>18</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2018. *The End of the Liberal International Order?*. International Affairs. vol. 94, nr. 1: 7-23.

<sup>19</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2020. p. 133-142.

often referred to as liberal institutionalism. These institutions have had an impact on many states of the world because states are able to interact with each other through these institutions, and as a result, norms, principles, and values have been created. These norms and principles must be followed, for states to be a part of the liberal international order, where states often are interdependent of each other. According to neoliberalism, this world system, where nations are economically interdependent on one another, facilitates absolute gains for every state involved. This can be regarded as absolute gains, which is a contrast to relative gains, which play a huge role in the theory of neorealism. Absolute gain is when the distribution of gains is not measured, like for relative gains. The gains for states within the interdependent 'web' might not be distributed equally, but for neoliberalist, this system is possible because the nations primarily care about the how the gains are distributed in relative to partnering states, but they are rather satisfied if it gains something for the overall partnership<sup>20</sup>. The aspect of interdependence in neoliberalism, is something that Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have further developed, so it fits the modern society – they call it complex interdependence, which will be further explained in the next chapter.

### 3.3 Complex interdependence

Interdependence is a huge part of neoliberalism and the globalized world. In common parlance, at least when it comes to international relations, the word dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. The word Interdependence can most simply be defined as mutual dependency. Interdependence in the world of politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among states or among other actors in different states, such as international organizations<sup>21</sup>. This is often categorized as international transactions, flows of money, goods, people, and messages across international boundaries. This interdependence has increased significantly after the Second World War. It must be mentioned that interdependency between states is not equally to states being interconnected with each other. Transactions effected by the interdependence between states is categorized as having some costs and constraints attached to them. In situations, where interactions do not have a significant costly effect, there is interconnectedness. In contrary to that, in situations, where there are reciprocal (but not necessarily symmetrical) costly effects of transaction, there is interdependence between the actors. Robert Keohane and Joseph nye has further developed the term of interdependence, calling it 'complex interdependence', which is following the neoliberal tradition. This theory of complex interdependence has three major factors about how international relations are directed in the modern world. These three assumptions are:

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<sup>20</sup> De Buck and Hosli. 2020, op. cit., p. 12-13

<sup>21</sup> Keohane, Robert O & Joseph S. Nye. 1989. *Power and interdependence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Scott, Foresman & Co. Northbrook



- Multiple channels connect societies
- Absence of a hierarchy among issues
- Minor role of military force

These three factors will be introduced later in this chapter. First, it can be mentioned what this theory can contribute to. The theory can be used to explain how the power structures have shifted in the modern-day. Furthermore, it can be used to analyze how states are dealing with each other in a complex web of interconnectedness in relations that a state participates in. These relations can both be inter-state relations, but also other forms of relations. In the following sections, the three different factors will be introduced and how they are to be understood.

#### *Multiple channels connect societies*

According to Keohane and Nye, multiple channels connect societies. This includes informal ties between governmental elites as well as formal foreign office arrangements; informal ties among nongovernmental elites (face-to-face and through digital communication); and transnational organizations (which can be multinational banks or corporations)<sup>22</sup>. Thus, this means that governments (and NGO's etc.) get in contact with each other on official state visits. However, it is not only official and physical visit who can be counted for, also something as trivial as telephone calls and online meetings between bureaucrats and low-ranking officials, can be regarded as an important channel to conduct foreign relations. In addition to that, Keohane and Nye argue that the role of the state in international relations is shrinking to a degree. Instead of the national state, the channels through other multinational actors have become important, especially after the second world war. This might be because of the rise of international organizations created after the war, such as the NATO and the UN. Through these organizations, states can communicate and coordinate together on a regular basis (at least more regularly than before the war). Other than the international organizations and the states, the non-state actors have seen a rise on the international scene, gaining more and more 'power'. This can among other be multinational corporations such as Microsoft, Apple, and multinational banks. These private actors, have, according to Keohane and Nye, had an increasing role in shaping domestic policies, as well as international policies. They argue that some of these actors can work as a form of lubricant that make government policies in different sectors sensitive to one another, and in that matter, they increase the interdependence between states. The degree to which these private actors have a role to play, is different for each government, making the interdependence level of some states less than other. However, Keohane and Nye argue, that most states to some extents have these kinds of private actors helping them to shape the domestic policies. Because of the different actors, such as the international organizations and the private

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<sup>22</sup> Keohane, Robert O & Joseph S. Nye. 1989. p. 24-25

multinational actors, the line between foreign policies and domestic policies, and economic activities, have become somehow blurred. To simplify the existence of multiple channels of a state, Keohane and Nye exemplify this as a to visit a major airport. Here, bureaucrats from different states travel to meet one another on official visits. Not only government officials, but also officials from international organizations and major international private actors. They go through these airports every day, to exchange and cooperate with each other in other states.

#### *Absence of hierarchy among issues*

Issues which governments are concerned with, have according to Keohane and Nye, become “*larger and more diverse*”<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, and in addition to this argument, Keohane and Nye explain that all issues cannot any longer be subordinated to military security, which were, more or less the earlier primary foreign policy issue. The more diverse and different types of foreign policy issues, and a more dynamic foreign policy agenda, can be from a description from former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger:

*“(...) progress in dealing with the traditional agenda is no longer enough. A new and unprecedented kind of issue has emerged. The problems of energy, resources, environment, population, the uses of space and the seas has now rank with questions of military security, ideology and territorial rivalry which have traditionally made up the diplomatic agenda”*<sup>24</sup>

This quote shows that there no longer, according to Kissinger, Keohane and Nye, is a hierarchy among foreign policy issues. Thus, military security is no longer the primary issue of foreign policies. The list of emerged issues from Kissinger, which can be extended, illustrates how policies of different governments, which previously were considered domestic policies, nowadays impinge on one another, and thereby also can be considered foreign policies. Again, the blurred lines between domestic and foreign policy in relation to non-state and private actors (multiple channels) are important to mention. Keohane and Nye argue that international organizations such as OECD, IMF, and the European Community all have created extensive and consulting operations within nine of the major departments of the United States government, which can be seen as a characteristic of the overlap between domestic and foreign policies among developed pluralist states<sup>25</sup>. Keohane and Nye argue, that when there are multiple issues on the agenda, which has the potential to be a threat to several domestic groups, the problems of formulating a coherent and consistent foreign policy increase. Some great examples, which characterize the problems of creating a coherent and consistent foreign policy, can be the migration problem in the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global crisis of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Keohane & Nye. 1989, op. cit., p 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

environment. Here, multiple actors have interests of fixing the problems, such as the governments, international organizations, the military, and even private actors. When international politics require to align with domestic policies of several pluralist democratic states, then opportunities for e.g., delay, inconsistency, and incoherence increases.

### *Minor role of military force*

The third component of complex interdependence is the minor role of military force. Traditionally, political scientists have emphasized the role of military force in international politics. Keohane and Nye argue that force dominated other means of power, for example, if there are no constraints on one's choice of instruments, the state with superior military power would prevail. Thus, the argument being that military force and power is always a central component of national power. However, especially among industrialized and pluralist states, the perceived margin of safety has been widened. The fear of attacks in general has declined, and the fear of being attacked by military power from an interdependent state is virtually nonexistent. Intense relationships of mutual influence exist between states, that earlier have had history of being in war with one another 'often'. Nowadays, because of these relationships, the use of force is irrelevant or unimportant as an instrument of policy. Examples of complex interdependence, where former military tensions have been abandoned, are the relationship between the United Kingdom and Germany, tensions between Canada and the US and additionally, that France abandoned their foreign policy principle of *Tous Azimuts* (which means 'defense in all directions) under Charles de Gaulle<sup>26</sup>. Even though the presence of military power is minor, doesn't not mean that military power and military force isn't completely irrelevant in modern day international relations. Even if strong military powers don't use it as force, the presence of a strong military power, in combination with a functioning government, can influence foreign policy and foreign relations between states. A great example of this is the nuclear deterrence of the cold war, where nuclear powers had 'a loader voice' than states without nuclear power. However, Keohane and Nye argue that armed conflicts is *not likely* to happened between interdependent states, because the cost of such conflicts will be too enormous<sup>27</sup>. Thus, Keohane and Nye argue that for two states, which relationship can be categorized complex interdependent, two factors where the presence of a strong military and force can still be used as an important bargaining tool. These two factors are:

- Drastic social and political change in one or both states.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Keohane & Nye. 1989, op. cit., p 28-29.

- In a situation where a state uses its military force to protect another state, then the protective state may have significant political influence over the other state<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, Keohane and Nye argue that in North-South relations, the East-West relations, as well as relationship among third world countries, force and military power is considered to play a significant role of foreign policy – but that states, whose relations can be considered as complex interdependent, the use of military power and force is withholding<sup>29</sup>.

## 4. Overview

This chapter can be considered as a wider introduction, which has the intension of explaining the context of the relationship between the EU and China, before getting to the analysis of this project. The chapter consist of an introduction to EU enlargement processes, the Chinese and European projects in the WB6, and how the political elites of the WB6 perceive China and the EU.

### 4.1 Why are the WB6 interesting for China and the EU?

The WB6 are six different states that have different cultures, languages, values, norms etc., but they also have some major things in common. What these six states all have in common, besides being neighboring states and some of them earlier Yugoslavia, is that they currently aren't member states of the EU, despite being located in the middle of the EU. For that reason, these states can be regarded as interesting for actors like the EU and China, but it might not be for the same reasons. For the EU, the WB6 are important, because they one day will become member states of the EU. That is the overall wish for the EU. The EU regards all of the WB6 states as enlargement states, and some of them are already considered candidate states. The relationship between the EU and WB6 is strong and comprehensive and is mainly built around cooperation, trade, European integration, and institution building. On the other side is China, who also have interest in the WB6. The relationship between these two is rather limited, when it comes to values and norms, which is more important in the other relationship. The relationship between these two can almost purely be regarded as economic, where the economic power of China does not have many requirements on norms and values. Now, the relationship between the EU and WB6 will be explained, afterwards the same will be done for the WB6 and China.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## 4.2 The relationship between the WB6 and the EU

In this section a selection of different projects will be introduced, in order to get an understanding of what the relationship between the EU and the WB6 is built around. A brief introduction of the project will be shown, but also how much finance is behind the projects. This is done, in order to understand how much money, the EU and China are investing in this region, so it somehow can be compared to each other. The Chinese investments and projects will be introduced later. First, a brief introduction to the EU enlargement process is introduced, in order to understand why the projects and investments are done.

### 4.2.1 The EU enlargement process

In order to grasp the importance of the EU's investments and influence in WB6, and why these projects are done, a brief introduction to the EU enlargement process will be presented. At the time of the EU enlargement process, the European Commission helps states, who wishes to join the EU, to meet the necessary criteria for membership and supports them in implementing the related economic and democratic reforms. Any state on the continent of Europe can apply for membership in the EU, if the state respects the EU's democratic values and is committed to the promotion of them. In addition to that, a state can only join the EU if it meets the membership criteria, which is known as the 'Copenhagen criteria'. Here, a state who wishes to join the EU needs to have (briefly introduced):

- Stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities.
- A functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU.
- The ability to take on and effectively implement the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union<sup>30</sup>.

These are the common conditions, which are needed to be fulfilled, before a state can join the EU. However, additional conditions were set for the WB6, which are called 'stabilization and association process'<sup>31</sup>. This process can briefly be introduced as a process, which is mostly related to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. The importance of good relations and cooperation in the WB6 is important, because the region often is associated with conflicts. When the mentioned criteria are fulfilled, the given state who

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<sup>30</sup> European Commission. 2022 (1). *Conditions for membership*. European Commission – European Neighborhood policy and Enlargement Negotiations. Accessed May 13, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership_en)

<sup>31</sup> European Commission. 2022 (2). *Stabilization and Association Process*. European Commission. Accessed May 13, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-process\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-process_en)

has applied for membership, is considered a 'candidate state', and then the next step would be member state-negotiations, but only if all the EU governments agree. These negotiations contain a lot of several processes, such as screening and position negotiations. The important thing to keep in mind is, that the pace of the process of a state joining the EU are varying a lot and can take several years. In the next chapters, it will be presented how the EU aids the WB6, when it comes to fulfilling these just mentioned requirements and criteria.

#### 4.2.2 IPA

In 2007, the European Commission launched the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) for the EU to support the development of democracy in the enlargement areas, like the WB6. IPA is how the EU supports reforms in the enlargement region with financial and technical assistance. Since 2007, three terms of IPA have been active. The first IPA was from 2007 to 2013, the successor, IPA II, was from 2014 to 2020, and the current IPA III started in 2021 and is set to end in 2027. The states benefiting from these IPAs are WB6 and Turkey<sup>32</sup>.

The combined budget of these IPAs is intense, and for every new IPA, the budget has been upgraded. IPA I had a budget of EUR 11,5 billion. IPA II had a budget of EUR 12,8 billion, and the current IPA III has a budget of EUR 14,16 billion. The combined budget is a total of EUR 38,45 billion (until 2027)<sup>33</sup>.

Since it's 2022, I will focus on the newest IPA III. The objective of this IPA is to support the states in adopting and implementing political, institutional, legal, administrative, social, and economic reforms to comply with the EU's values and to progressively align with the EU's rules, standards, policies, and practices. This all have the goal of an EU membership and thereby contributing to the stability, security, and prosperity of the states – both the WB6, but also the current member states. The programming of 2021 to 2027 reflects the specific objective of IPA III regulation and focusses on the priorities of the enlargement process according to five thematic windows. These thematic windows, and the indicative allocation<sup>34</sup>, are shown below:

Window 1; Rule of law, fundamental rights democracy: 15,13%

Window 2: Good governance, EU *acquis* alignment, good neighbourly relations, and strategic communications: 16,59%

Window 3: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity: 42,25%

Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth: 22,31%

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<sup>32</sup> European Commission. 2022. (3). *Overview – Instrument for Pre-accession Assistant*. European neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. Accessed April 6, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Window 5: Territorial and cross-border cooperation: 3,51%

Some of the newest funded projects are a transmission line between North Macedonia and Albania and a Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the European Commission launched a EUR 3,2 billion investment package in the WB6, where EUR 1 billion were from the IPA III program. Regarding infrastructure, this package aims to construct major road and railway connections in the region. These projects will facilitate regional trade, reduce travel time, and spur sustainable economic growth which ultimately brings great benefits for citizens and businesses<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4.2.3 IPARD

This program is a part of the IPA, which focus on the rural areas and the agri-food sectors (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development). Farming and rural businesses in the current EU candidate states are eligible. The WB6 states that are eligible are Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

Through this tool, the EU facilitate financial and technical help with the aim of:

- Making the agricultural sector and rural areas more sustainable.
- Aligning them with common agricultural policies of the EU<sup>37</sup>.

*Economic contributions from the EU through IPARD (2014 to 2020):*

- Albania: EUR 71 million
- Montenegro: EUR 39 million
- North Macedonia: EUR 60 million
- Serbia: EUR 175 million

Total contributions from the EU to the eligible WB6 states: EUR 345 million.

#### 4.2.4 COSME

This program is aimed for the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Through this program, businesses have easier access to guarantees, loans, and equal capital. One of the goals of the project is the opening of

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<sup>35</sup> Western Balkan Investment Framework. 2022. *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021-2027*. Wbif.eu. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.wbif.eu/eip>

<sup>36</sup> European Commission. 2022. (4). *European Commission launches €3.2 billion investment package to advance sustainable connectivity in the Western Balkans*. European Commission. Accessed April 6, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_1362](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1362)

<sup>37</sup> European Commission. 2022 (5). *Overview of EU pre-accession for rural development*. European Commission. Accessed April 5, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/international-cooperation/enlargement/pre-accession-assistance/overview\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/international-cooperation/enlargement/pre-accession-assistance/overview_en)

markets and the project help businesses to access markets in the EU and beyond. It funds the Enterprise Europe Network that help SMEs find business and technology partners and understand EU legislation<sup>38</sup>.

The program ran from 2014 to 2020, and the estimated budget of contributions was EUR 2.3 billion. I will try to show an overview of how much the EU, has aided the WB6 through this program, according to their own website<sup>39</sup>:

**Albania:**

Contribution: EUR 733.741,22

Number of projects: 4

**Kosovo:**

Contribution: EUR 2.093.116

Number of projects: 3

**Bosnia and Hercegovina:**

Contribution: EUR 903.787,27

Number of projects: 6

**Serbia:**

Contribution: EUR 2.451.146,77

Number of projects: 7

**Montenegro:**

Contribution: EUR 480.522,83

Number of projects: 5

**North Macedonia:**

Contribution: EUR 706.428,41

Number of projects: 5

#### 4.2.5 CREATIVE EUROPE

CREATIVE EUROPE is the flagship program European Commission to support the culture and audiovisual sectors. CREATIVE EUROPE invest in actions that reinforce cultural diversity and respond to the needs and challenges of the cultural and creative sectors. The main objective of this program is to:

- Safeguard, develop, and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage.

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<sup>38</sup> European Commission. 2022 (6). *COSME – Europe's programme for small and medium-sized enterprises*. European Commission. Accessed March 22, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme_en)

<sup>39</sup> COSME. 2022. *COSME data hub*. COSME. Accessed March 22, 2022. <https://cosme.easme-web.eu/>



- Increase the competitiveness and economic potential of the cultural and creative sectors, in particular the audiovisual sector.

The novelties of the program will contribute to the recovery of these sectors, reinforcing their efforts to become more inclusive, more digital, and environmentally more sustainable.

The CREATIVE EUROPE program (from 2021-2027) has a budget of EUR 2,44 billion<sup>40</sup>, but how much that is contributed to the WB6 are unknown. In the year of 2021, nothing was contributed to these countries, but all the WB6 states are eligible to apply for funding in this program. Through this program, the WB6 can express and exchange their culture, but also to learn from their European neighbors, which can contribute to a feeling of togetherness and understanding of the EU member states. All in all, this program makes EU member states able to understand the WB6 through culture, but also makes the WB6 able to understand the EU members through culture.

#### 4.2.6 CUSTOMS 2020

CUSTOMS 2020 is an EU cooperation program. The program enables national customs administrations to create and exchange information and expertise. The program allows joint developing and operating major trans-European IT system together, as well as establishing networks by bringing together national officials from across Europe. The general objective of the program is to support the functioning and modernization of the customs union in order to strengthen the internal market by means of cooperation between participating states, their customs authorities, and their officials<sup>41</sup>.

Both EU member states and candidate, as well as potential candidate states can join the program. All the WB6 states has joined the program in the time between 2014 and 2020. The program, which were from 2014 till 2020 had a budget of EUR 522.9 million.

#### 4.2.7 Erasmus+

ERASMUS+ promotes cooperation in education, training, youth, and sport. It is open to students, educational staff, and youth groups in the WB6 (and the EU member states), who wish to study, teach, or volunteer abroad. All the WB6 states are a part of this program, which mean that students from these states can travel to other European states to study, but professors can also travel abroad to teach<sup>42</sup>. It can also be flipped

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<sup>40</sup> European Commission. 2022. (7). *Culture and Creativity*. European Commission. Accessed March 24, 2022. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/about-the-creative-europe-programme>

<sup>41</sup> European Commission. 2022. (8). *Taxation and Customs Union*. European Commission. Accessed March 24, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/national-authorities/customs-2020\\_en#heading\\_0](https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/national-authorities/customs-2020_en#heading_0)

<sup>42</sup> European Commission. 2022. (9). *European Education and Culture Executive Agency*. European Commission. Accessed March 24, 2022. [https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/new-erasmus-programme-2021-2027-has-launched-2021-03-25\\_da](https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/new-erasmus-programme-2021-2027-has-launched-2021-03-25_da)

around, in the way that students and professors of EU member states can travel to the WB6 states to study or teach, which gives knowledge to, and about the states involved. This is also one of the objectives of the program – to create a sense of European collectivity.

Data from the earlier Erasmus+ program (2015-2020) show that 29.910 students and staff left the WB6 area to study or teach, while 18.224 students and staff went from EU member states travelled to the WB6<sup>43</sup>. The budget of this program is EUR 26.2 billion, which is for the timeline from 2021 to 2027.

#### 4.2.8 The Fiscalis Program

This program allows developing and operating major trans-European IT systems together, as well as establishing networks by bringing together national tax administration officials from across Europe to create and exchange information and expertise. This program is not only open for EU member states, but also open for acceding states, candidate states, potential states, the European Neighborhood Policy states as well as other third states, subject to specific provisions<sup>44</sup>. As of 2022, five of the six WB6s are participants. The budget of this program is EUR 269 million. The EU tax policy has a substantial important contribution to the fight against tax fraud and it supports revenue collection for the EU and Member States' budget. It is a key element in efforts to strengthen an EU Internal Market.

#### 4.2.9 Summary of the EU projects in the WB6

This was just a few projects, where the EU supports the WB6, but in return, the EU get a region which will be more ready for the standards of the EU, which means that (on paper) these states will be more ready for the EU membership.

Here, it will be listed how the WB6 has been economically supported, both directly and indirectly.

***Directly funding to the WB6 (from what is listed above):***

*IPA (2007 – 2027 – including Turkey):* EUR 38,46 billion

*IPARD (2014 – 2020):* Total for Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia: EUR 345 million

*COSME (2014 – 2020):* Total for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia: EUR 7.368.742,5

Overall (From the programs listed above): EUR 39,102 billion

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<sup>43</sup> European Commission. 2014. *EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+*. European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/regional/westernbalkans-regional-erasmusplus-2020.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> European Commission. 2021 (1). *The Fiscalis Programme*. European Commission. Accessed March 25, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/national-authorities/fiscalis-programme\\_en#heading\\_0](https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/national-authorities/fiscalis-programme_en#heading_0)

***Indirectly funding to the WB6 – meaning that WB6 are included among several other states (from what is listed above):***

*Creative Europe (2021 – 2017):* Overall budget 2,44 billion

*Customs 2020 (2014 – 2020):* Overall budget EUR 522.9 million

*Erasmus+ (2021 – 2027):* Overall budget EUR 26.2 billion

*The Fiscalis Program (2021 – 2027):* EUR 269 million

Overall (from the programs listed above): EUR 29,4319 billion

If we combine the directly and indirectly investment and funding, the number is EUR 68,2441 billion. We must keep in mind, that these investments and fundings are only from the period from 2007 – 2027. With that being said, the ‘real’ number is much bigger than the number just written – the list of projects and plans are very long – I have chosen the ones I found as the ‘biggest’ and most impactful in terms of democracy, rule of law, economy, and culture.

Thus, these projects of investments and fundings establish institutions in these states, that will improve their status of democracy, rule of law, cooperation, etc., but also accentuate the values of the EU, such as free movement, free market and ‘togetherness’.

#### 4.3 The relationship between the WB6 countries and China

In recent decades, the world has seen China grow and in many ways surpassed expectations, in terms of economic development. China's large and impressive growth led them to announce their major internationalization project 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) in 2013. This project is also called 'the new Silk Road', which is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever. BRI has defined five major priorities, which are policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and to connect people<sup>45</sup>. Since the beginning of the 10s, and after the publication of BRI, China has increased its appearance in the WB6. China has this, as they have financed and invested in large projects in the states. This is projects within infrastructure (motorways, railways, and energy sources). In addition to investments in these major infrastructure projects, China has also acquired large key shares of key companies in transportation and energy<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> European Bank for reconstruction and development. 2022. *Road and Belt initiative (BRI)*. Ebrd. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>

<sup>46</sup> Babulík, Matús. 2022. *China's influence in the Western Balkans. Strategic-analysis*. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.strategicanalysis.sk/chinas-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>

The projects and investments from the EU to the WB6 were just introduced. These investments are often associated with several requirements about values, such as freedom, democracy, and rule of law, which ultimately will make the WB6 more ready for EU memberships. The WB6 lack behind on these European Values, when they are compared to the EU member states, which is visible in appendix 1.

With that in mind, it is interesting to look at how China invests in projects in the WB6. China does not have requirements for the states when it comes to negotiating investments and the funding of projects.

The Chinese investments and projects are mostly done by a loan from the Chinese 'Exim Bank' (Export-Import Bank of China). It can be said that it might be easier for the WB6 to accept a loan from China than it is to live up to the demands from the EU (when considering the data of appendix 1) - however, it must be said that it is conceivable that the risk of taking these loans from China are large. Since the WB6 are not 'rich' states, they might be facing trouble repaying. Typically, these loans are given by the Chinese 'EXIM Bank', and the loans often have the time span of 15 years with around 3% interests<sup>47</sup>. In the following chapter, it will be introduced what China has invested and funded in the WB6.

#### 4.3.1 What in the WB6 has China primarily invested in?

Here it will be listed in what, and how much China have invested. This data is from 2010 and until 2021. The companies investing in the projects are all state-owned enterprises. A small list of the enterprises, that all invests in the WB6 are Shandong Gaosu, Zijin Mining, Hebei Steel, Huawei Technologies, and Shanghai Electric<sup>48</sup>.

The listed data is mostly acquired from American Enterprise Institute (AEI):

##### **Serbia:**

EUR 13,637 billion

- Power Constructions
- Communication constructions
- Transport infrastructure (an example is the Mihajlo Pupin bridge)
- Metal and mining firms.
- Huawei (civil surveillance and face recognition).

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<sup>47</sup> Markovic, Nina and Wang, Xiwen. 2021. *Is China's rising influence in the Western Balkans a threat to European integration?* Journal of contemporary European Studies. Vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 234-250

<sup>48</sup> American Enterprise Institute. 2022. *China global investment tracker*. Aei.org. Accessed April 6, 2022.  
<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>

Furthermore, China has not only been supporting Serbia through investments of infrastructure etc., but China has also been intensifying the civil-military cooperation between the two states, which can be exemplified by military, technological and security donations from China to Serbia more than EUR 9 million, which drew criticism from many analysts and even more so from EU leaders and officials<sup>49</sup>.

In addition, China and Serbia have established a visa-free regime for short term visitors, such as tourists and workers, which have allowed a great number Chinese workers and tourists to Serbia. Lastly, the relationship between China and Serbia improved drastically after the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. The Serbian president praised the help of China, whereas the EU were slow regarding the help of the Western Balkan areas – the president of Serbia even stated: “European solidarity does not exist. Only China can help”<sup>50</sup>.

It must be mentioned that not all these Chinese projects and investments in Serbia, come with no critique. Some of the Chinese ventures in Serbia, which includes a smoke-belching steel works near Belgrade, a copper mine smelter in the town of Bor, and a tire factory has sparked heated debates in the state. Thousands of people have been demonstrating in the streets, after it was found out that Vietnamese workers has miserable working conditions at the tire factory. This is also something that the EU sees as a ‘red alarm’, which ultimately hinders Serbia’s accession process to the EU<sup>51</sup>. Both workers and activists claim that problems like human trafficking, prisonlike working conditions and environmental abuse are endemic at these factories, which also hinders the EU accession process. This shows that these ‘easy’ investments achieved from China, comes with other costs than just financial costs. Problems likes these will also be introduced in the other countries.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina:**

EUR 2,03 billion

- Power generators
- Power construction
- Energy engineering
- Infrastructure projects

The relationship and cooperation between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been growing steadily in the last decades.

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<sup>49</sup> Markovic and Wang. 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Air1. 2020. *President of Serbia kisses Chinese flag – China’s ‘mask diplomacy’ wins friends*. Air1.com. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.air1.com/news/u-s-world/president-of-serbia-kisses-chinese-flag-china-s-mask-diplomacy-wins-friends-11503>

<sup>51</sup> Higgins, Andrew. 2022. *‘Miserable and Dangerous’: a failed Chinese promise in Serbia*. The New York Times. Accessed May 27, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/china-serbia-vietnamese-workers.html>

The Chinese funded projects and investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina are primarily related to infrastructure and energy (power-plants etc.)<sup>52</sup>. This is among other the Stanari power plant. However, some of these plants have an uncertain future, as Bosnia and Herzegovina has been unable to secure financing from the Chinese EXIM-bank<sup>53</sup>.

**Montenegro:**

EUR 1,09 billion

- Communications Construction
- State Power Investment Cooperation
- Infrastructure projects

China has also been invested and funded projects in Montenegro. A remarkable one is the reconstruction of an old coal power-plant (Pljevlja power plant), which ultimately will reduce emissions, in line with the standards of the EU. This is, among other, projects of China, which has been successful in Montenegro.

However, in the case of Montenegro, the one projects that stands out, is the massive highway project. The project hasn't been finished yet, and furthermore, Montenegro has not paid for it yet. This means that cars cannot drive on the highway, and Montenegro's ability to pay for the project is far from achievable – Montenegro has a dept of more than 100% of its GDP<sup>54</sup>. "We make a joke: It is a highway from nothing to nothing," says the former minister of Justice, Dragan Soc. Several other politicians and economists have said that Montenegro properly never will be able to repay the dept to the Chinese EXIM bank. The loan-contract for the highway underlines, that if Montenegro is unable to repay the dept, then China has the right to seize land inside Montenegro, as long as it doesn't belong to the military or is used for diplomatic matters.

**North Macedonia:**

EUR 581 million

- Power Constructions (etc. a hydroelectric station)<sup>55</sup>
- China national Machinery

The relationship between China and North Macedonia has been going back and forth throughout the years. In the early 1990's the two states had a solid relationship, however that changed in 1999 when North Macedonia recognized the independence of Taiwan. Then, in 2001, North Macedonia reversed the decision,

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<sup>52</sup> Stojkovski, Bojan. 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Prtoric, Jelena. 2022. *China's pledge to end overseas coal support yields mixed results in Serbia and Bosnia*. ChinaDialogue. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://chinadialogue.net/en/energy/chinas-overseas-coal-pledge-yields-mixed-results-in-serbia-and-bosnia/>

<sup>54</sup> Schmitz, Rob. 2021. *How A Chinese-Built Highway Drove Montenegro Deep into Debt*. NPR. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/28/1010832606/road-deal-with-china-is-blamed-for-catapulting-montenegro-into-historic-debt?t=1646217400597>

<sup>55</sup> Markovic and Wang. 2021.

and after that the bilateral relationship could be build up again. In addition to the investments and projects listed above, North Macedonia has invested in six electric trains from China, which has the purpose of upgrading their public transportation.

Interestingly, North Macedonia is the first state that managed to take the USD 10 billion credit loan, which is meant to be for infrastructure projects, offered by China. Thus, North Macedonia now has a giant Chinese loan, and in accordance with that, North Macedonia is a relatively poor country. Furthermore, previous Chinese projects in North Macedonia might not have always complied with the local regulations on public procurements<sup>56</sup>.

**Kosovo:**

The relationship between Kosovo and China is limited. One aspect of this, is that China opposed Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, and China even went as far as initiating a legal challenge against Pristina's decision in the international court of justice<sup>57</sup>. The Chinese distancing from Kosovo might be shaped by concerns that the recognition of Kosovo might set an example for other places such as Tibet or Xinjiang. This might be one of the reasons why China has invested and funded so many projects in Serbia, who also doesn't recognize Kosovo as an independent state.

**Albania:**

EUR 755 million:

- Bushat Hydropower plant (EUR 113 million)<sup>58</sup>.
- Canada's Banker's Petroleum, which has been the largest company in Albania since 2014, decided to sell two oil fields to the Chinese company for EUR 442 million (and the airport is now under management until 2025 – with the possibility of a 2-year-extension).
- The Canadian oil-company, Bankers, has sold their oilfields in Albania, has been bought by Geo-Jade, which is a Chinese state-owned oil company. These oilfields produce 95% of Albania's crude.
- China is building a EUR 200 million highway from Tirana to Dibar in western Macedonia

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<sup>56</sup> Krstinovska, Ana. 2022. *The Place of North Macedonia in China's Strategy for the Western Balkans*. Kad.de. Accessed April 6, 2022.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/281657/281706/The+place+of+North+Macedonia+in+China%27s+strategy+for+the+Western+Balkans.pdf/ead21e16-32aa-8c14-07df-3c40696ac851?version=1.0&t=1579528320386>

<sup>57</sup> Tonchev, Plamen. 2017. *China's Road: into the Western Balkans*. Iss. Accessed April 6, 2022.

<https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%203%20China%27s%20Silk%20Road.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> AIDDATA. 2022. *China Eximbank loans \$126 million for Bushat hydro power station in Albania*. Aiddata China. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/42265/>

As well as with the other states, China has invested in a broad range of projects in Albania, including powerplants and infrastructure. Furthermore, China has invested in the airport of Tirana, and has the majority of shares.

However, it must also be mentioned here, that not all the agreed upon projects between China and Albania has gone smoothly. In 2016, a Chinese construction company withdrew from the Arber Road project, which were valued at more than USD 200 million. Afterwards it was taken over by an Albanian construction company with the help of state given financial assistance<sup>59</sup>. With that in mind, it indicates that China is quick to gain access to investment-projects in the region, but as fast as they are to join them, they are as well as fast to leave them, leaving big projects and big financial burdens on these states.

### ***Overall Chinese investments and funding in the WB6***

From the data acquired from above, the Chinese investments and fundings from 2010 to 2021 is calculated to the overall value of EUR 17,159 billion.

From this, the majority of the projects has been targeted towards energy/powerplants and infrastructure. Many of the projects has been successful but some of them has been a failure, where the highway in Montenegro stands out. The failed projects leave big problems behind to the states, and it might even hinder the accession process towards the EU. Furthermore, some of the failed projects has left the states in big debt-traps, where some of them is considered impossible to repay. However, some of the successful projects might be able to improve the WB6 states development on EU standards, such as the green agenda and economic development due to improved infrastructure.

#### 4.3.2 Chinese cultural centers and Confucius institutes in the WB6

It is not only economic contributions and loans that is growing between the WB6 and China, academic and personal are growing as well. This is typified by the increasing range and intensity of interaction between universities and other educational institutions<sup>60</sup>. Different platforms, such as the Confucius Institute at the university of Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina are expanding its programs into research and teaching, which include degree courses on subjects related to China.

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<sup>59</sup> InvestInAlbania, 2017. *Govt Accepts €250mIn for Arberi Road Construction*. Investinalbania. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://invest-in-albania.org/govt-accepts-e250mIn-arberi-road-construction/>

<sup>60</sup> European Council on Foreign Affairs, 2021. *Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans*. E CFR. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans>



This means, that study-programs on China, Chinese Culture etc. are getting more common in these states, which can be explained by the economic growth and importance of China on a 'world-scene', but it can also be tracked down to the relationship that China has built with these states for the last many years.

This is slowly evolving into programmes, not as big as the Erasmus+ program, but the number of Chinese professors teaching in these states is rapidly increasing, meaning that more WB6-students might want to visit China, instead of choosing a program like Erasmus+. In the last couple of years, Chinese universities and research centers have rapidly developed their expertise on states in south-eastern and central Europe. There are now 23 such university departments and other structures in China, while they have set up 30 other centers focused on states in the region in the last decade or so. The Beijing-supported China-CEE Institute, based in Budapest, is becoming an increasingly important hub for research and analysis. The institute helps integrate pro-Beijing experts into the academic, research, and analytical communities.

This shows that not only economic and financial contributions are important the relationship between the WB6 and China, but also academic and cultural exchange.

#### 4.4 Comparison between EU and Chinese investments

When comparing the influence of China in the WB6 with the influence of the EU, it is not a surprise that the influence of the EU is bigger. It might be so, because a goal both for (some) of the WB6 states and the EU, is that these states one day will become members of the EU. Furthermore, the EU is much closer to the WB6, whereas China is on a whole other continent. However, as a part of the Chinese Belt and Road project, big Chinese investments has been made in the region of the WB6. Therefore, let's see, how the difference of funding and investments in the WB6 is, when comparing the Chinese investments to the ones of the EU (from the data above)

As written above, the total number of EU investments (both directly and indirectly) is EUR 68,2441 billion. However, we must also keep in mind that not all the projects have been included in this calculation – only some of them, which I found the most impactful regarding EU values (and also excluding earlier projects).

If we compare that to the Chinese investments (which we have acquired above), that is EUR 17,159 billion, which is considerably lower than the funding and investments of the EU. Thus, the investments of the EU are roughly 4 times bigger than the ones of China. However, it is interesting that China is that far away from the WB6, but still have relatively high investments in the region.

It is also interesting to take a glance at the import/export of some of the WB6, and how they trade with the EU and China (this is visible in Appendix 2 for Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia). Here, it is possible to see, that the trade between these WB6 and the EU is on a much larger scale and their trade with China. One

part of this is of course the distance to the EU. This makes it interesting, because why would China develop roads, plants etc. in states, with whom they don't have a massive economic relationship with.

#### 4.5 The WB6 perception and relationship with the EU and China

How the WB6 perceive the EU and China, and the relationship with them, can have an importance when analyzing how the relationship between the EU and China is to be interpreted. The perception from the WB6 to the two actors can have an importance, because it can have an influence on how these states are acting. Furthermore, it is also important to mention, because not all WB6 states are the same, they all have different interests. In addition to that, how the WB6 states perceive the two actors, combined with the fact that both China and the EU are doing investments and projects in these states, would maybe give the WB6 a kind of bargaining power, as if they could choose between the EU and China. In that matter, this would also invite to a sort of rivalry between the EU and China, when it comes to the WB6. In that matter, the next sections will uncover, how the attitude of the ruling elite in the WB6 are towards the EU and China. Here, official statements will be drawn into attention. The statements will primarily be from presidents, as well as former presidents of the states, from around 2010 and forward. In addition to the presidents, current and former prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs will be included.

##### 4.5.1 Serbia

When browsing the internet for statements about the Serbian relationship with respectively the EU and China, it seems that Serbia is one of the WB6 states with the closest ties with China. However, the current president of Serbia has stated, that the future of Serbia, and the rest of the WB6, lies in the EU. Here is what he said: "(...) I want to believe that the future of the Western Balkans indeed lies in the EU, but nobody has the right, and I said that today, to object to us wanting to live and survive". Thus, he recognizes that Serbia, one day might be a member state of the EU, however, it seems like, according to this statement, that Serbia do not like the idea of giving some sovereignty away. Furthermore, it seems like the loss of sovereignty isn't the only thing about the EU, which the president doesn't like. He openly stressed criticism towards the EU, back when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Here, he especially criticized the solidarity of the EU, which he stated: "(...) European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairytale on paper"<sup>61</sup>. He further addressed his criticism towards the EU regarding assistance against the Coronavirus: "(...) As of today, as you know, we

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<sup>61</sup> Evans, Zachary. 2020. *Serbian President Labels European Solidarity 'Fairy Tale', says only China can assist in Coronavirus response*. National review. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/coronavirus-outbreak-serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-labels-european-solidarity-fairy-tale-says-only-china-can-assist-in-coronavirus-response/>

cannot even import goods, according to the European Union's decisions. Ursula von der Leyen said this a while ago, we cannot import medical equipment from EU countries<sup>62</sup>". The period with Coronavirus is not the only time, where Serbian elites has stressed their criticism, but also affiliation to China. About the Serbian relationship with China, the current president has stated the following: "(...) When they learn that Serbia has a free trade agreement with China, then Serbia will truly become the best investment destination in this part of Europe by far<sup>63</sup>". Here he might address the fact, that Serbia is the state, out of all the WB6 states, where China has the most influence, projects, and investments. It could seem like, that the Serbian president knows that this, potentially, can be a problem for the EU. In that matter, it could be argued that the Serbian president uses the Serbian-Chinese relationship as a tool, in order for Serbia to negotiate better with the EU. Finally, when it comes to the Serbian elite, it can be argued that they know that their ties and future might lay with the EU, but that they until that day, and maybe even continuously, can take the offers from China, in order for help themselves, where Serbian elites might argue, that the EU haven't been able to assist them effectively. This could be tied with the neorealist theory, where states calculate their actions in order for them to get the maximum amount of gains, where gains as an example could be economic investment from foreign states.

#### 4.5.2 Kosovo

When it comes to Kosovo, it can be regarded as a opposite scenario as Serbia. As presented earlier, the ties between Kosovo and China are limited, which might be because of how they regard each other. As mentioned earlier, China does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. In accordance with that, it can be mentioned that there are no political ties between China and Kosovo. In the contrary, Kosovo has been pushing the EU integration. The president of Kosovo, Viosa Osmani, has been pushing several factors in Kosovo, which can be regarded as EU standards. An example is, that Kosovo in 2021 extended the EU rule of law mission. Even though some aspects of EU integration in Kosovo have seen progress, Kosovo still lacks behind in some of the aspects, where the European Commission puts focus on democracy, corruption, and human rights<sup>64</sup>. However, it seems like the recent couple of elections in Kosovo have had a focus on anti-corruption and a pro-EU vision<sup>65</sup>, which could indicate that Kosovo is pushing for their accession into the EU.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> EURACTIV, 2022. *Vučić, Xi Jinping hail ironclad friendship between Serbia and China*. EURACTIV. Accessed April 26, 2022. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/vucic-xi-jinping-hail-ironclad-friendship-between-serbia-and-china/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/vucic-xi-jinping-hail-ironclad-friendship-between-serbia-and-china/)

<sup>64</sup> European Commission. 2021 (2). *Commission Staff Working Document – Kosovo 2021 report*. European Commission.

<sup>65</sup> Crowcroft, Orlando. 2021. *How EU enlargement apathy could push Kosovo and Albania to join forces*. Euronews. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/04/15/how-eu-enlargement-apaty-could-push-kosovo-and-albania-to-join-forces>

However, even though there aren't any political ties between China and Kosovo, China has still been trying to bid on key projects in Kosovo, such as a coal-based power-plant and some infrastructure projects, and in addition to that, Huawei has shown interest in selling equipment to Kosovo's main telecoms company. However, these bids were rejected<sup>66</sup>. Even though the offers were rejected, the bids still can give an indication of the intentions of China. Here, even though there are limited and even bad ties between China and Kosovo, China still wants to invest. This could give the indication, that China is doing their projects, solely for their own interest.

#### 4.5.3 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Chinese involvement in the state has been welcomed by some political elites of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This can be exemplified by the former prime minister, Vjekoslav Bevanda, who expressed a hope that even more Chinese enterprises would invest, and he pledged to offer a favorable investment environment and other incentives to them. In the beginning of the 2010's, the bilateral cooperation between the states intensified, whereas Bevanda stated: "(...) There is no pending issue to be resolved between the two countries"<sup>67</sup>. The bilateral cooperation between the two is not only visible through the investment of projects. As mentioned earlier, some of the Chinese Confucius institutes has been established in the state, which is functioning as a wider cooperation hub for culture, education, and research<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore, Sarajevo is one of the capitals, where a Chinese ambassador gradually establish contacts with non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations in order to build up a higher public visibility. Finally, an example of an intensified bilateral cooperation between the two, is that China supports some media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina. What the goal of the support is, is unknown<sup>69</sup>. Several other political elites of Bosnia and Herzegovina has also been public about their political opinion and relationship to China. An example of this is Milorad Dodik, a member of the BiH Presidency, who in 2019 said: "(...) I am convinced that China will be able to protect its interests and that the situation in Hong Kong will be normalized, because China has waited patiently for 100 years to regain sovereignty over Hong Kong, and it is undoubtedly its right to preserve that sovereignty now"<sup>70</sup>. However, even though support from Bosnia and Herzegovina elites has been shown towards Chinese investments and projects and other political issues, it seems like the elites of the states are

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<sup>66</sup> European Council of foreign relations. 2022. *Mapping China's rise in the Western Balkans – Kosovo*. ECFR. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/kosovo/>

<sup>67</sup> NewTimes, 2012. *China, Bosnia agree to step up cooperation*. The New Times. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/51358>

<sup>68</sup> European Council of foreign relations. 2022. *Mapping China's rise in the Western Balkans – Bosnia and Herzegovina*. ECFR. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> SRNA, 2019. *Support to China in efforts to maintain peace in Hong Kong*. SRNA. Accessed May 2, 2022. <http://www.srna.rs/novosti1/718507/support-to-china-in-efforts-to-maintain-peace-in-hong-kong.htm>

divided towards the Chinese interests and the progress towards EU accession. Bisera Turkovic, the current minister of foreign affairs, tweeted the following: “(...) In these grave & uncertain times for the security of Europe, we ask you to immediately grant (BiH icon) candidate status for the (EU icon). Accession to the EU guarantees peace and stability of (BiH icon) and the Western Balkans<sup>71</sup>”. This tweet came after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has granted a fear in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in accordance with that, the state wants to ‘speed up’ the EU accession progress. In that matter, negotiations and meetings between Bosnian elites and German elites, here among foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, has intensified, with the same goal as mentioned before, to speed up the process. However, Baerbock mentions, that Germany would only support those who were working to strengthen Bosnia and Herzegovina, not those seeking to destabilize and weaken it. Here, she refers to the politician which were mentioned before, Milorad Dodik, who is seeking independence for the Serbian part of the country<sup>72</sup>. This were only a few samples of statements from official political elites of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it is an exemplification of how the state, in many ways, is split politically and in which direction that they want to go.

#### 4.5.4 Montenegro

In the case of Montenegro, the perception of China and the EU can also be regarded as a mix, but in this case, it's more of a financial and economic scale. As introduced earlier, some of the Chinese projects in Montenegro, has put the state in a bad situation with debts for a huge percentage of their GDP<sup>73</sup>. The debts due to the Chinese projects could make the idea, that the elites of Montenegro would tend to have a more negative view upon China, but that is actually not the case when seeing statements from current and former elites of Montenegro. The current president, Milo Dukanovic, was sure that the cooperation between China and Montenegro would only rise, when he stated: “(...)“I am fully confident that cooperation between China and Montenegro, and between CEE countries and China, will flourish in the future”<sup>74</sup>. This statement came from a telephone talk between him and Xi Jinping. In that talk, they spoke about how the Chinese projects would connect China and the CEE states together. Furthermore, the former president, Filip Vujanovic, has even contradicted some western media, who has accused China of bringing Montenegro in a debt trap on purpose. On his blog, he stated the following: “(...) Numerous media renew and even strengthen the critique

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<sup>71</sup> Bisera Turkovic, 2022. Twitter. Accessed May 2, 2022.

<https://twitter.com/biseraturkovic/status/1499438064992718849>

<sup>72</sup> Deutsche Welle, 2022. *Germany calls for closer EU-Bosnia ties amid war in Ukraine*. Deutsche Welle. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-calls-for-closer-eu-bosnia-ties-amid-war-in-ukraine/a-61077779>

<sup>73</sup> Euractiv. 2021. *Montenegro starts paying off \$1 billion Chinese road loan*. EURACTIV. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/montenegro-starts-paying-off-1-billion-chinese-road-loan/>

<sup>74</sup> CGTN. 2021. *China, Montenegro vow joint efforts to promote cooperation between China, CEE countries*. CGTN. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-05-26/Xi-Jinping-holds-phone-talks-with-Montenegrin-president-10A5b5bVf68/index.html>

of this globally useful project, groundlessly accusing Chinese foreign policy of its alleged intentions to create a "debt trap." Reportedly, the country can become economically dependent on China, making the space for its political dependence on China<sup>75</sup>". In that matter, he is not only defending the Chinese projects in the state, but he is also further arguing that these projects can become very lucrative for the whole region. In the same blog, he stated the following: (...) I see it as a globally valuable, as an essential affirmation of multilateralism, as a chance for strengthening regional connectivity, and as a development opportunity for all the countries participating. I consider President Xi Jinping's initiative to implement and affirm this project as a huge chance for participating countries to use attractive and competitive financial potentials of the BRI<sup>76</sup>". Thus, the current and former presidents seem to have a positive mindset about the Chinese projects in the state, despite having sent them into economically unmanageable situations. The statements about bringing the states of the region together and making them economically stronger, might also be a positive point for the EU, as some of the states today are very divided. It does also seem like the elites of Montenegro have solid ties with the EU. The current president has stated: "(...) The EU will always have a stable partner in Montenegro"<sup>77</sup>. This makes a lot of sense because Montenegro sees themselves as the lead of EU accession of the WB6 states, where they for the last couple of years has done a lot of things to improve factors such as democracy and the accession as a NATO member-state, in order to have stability in the state. Dukonovic has in that matter stated: "(...) that the EU enlargement process for the Western Balkans countries is not only important for the region, but also for the stability and competitiveness of Europe<sup>78</sup>". In that matter, it can be argued that the elites are tilting the most towards the EU, but with that said, they do not consider China as an enemy in any matter. It could arguably seem like, that for the Montenegrins, the Chinese projects of infrastructure etc., are actually pushing the integration into the EU, as the projects might bring the WB6 states together.

#### 4.5.5 North Macedonia

The Chinese projects in North Macedonia has not been a massive, when compared to other states of WB6. It does also seem like, that the elites of North Macedonia want to become a member state of the EU as soon as possible. As the president of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski stated: "(...) We are the best-prepared candidate in the history of the organization. We have been in preparation since 2005, when we became a

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<sup>75</sup> Vujanovic, Filip. 2021. *Accusing China of creating 'debt trap' for Montenegro groundless*. GlobalTimes. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1221740.shtml>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> European Parliament. 2018. *The EU will always have a stable partner in Montenegro, says President Đukanović*. European Parliament – News. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180926IPR14404/the-eu-will-always-have-a-stable-partner-in-montenegro-says-president-djukanovic>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

candidate country. We have a lot of people experienced with European knowledge and they can immediately start negotiating in different clusters”<sup>79</sup>. However, in the same interview, he mentioned, that he thinks that the EU has been ‘too slow’ helping the WB6 in the accession process, and in that matter, he does understand why some of the WB6 states seems to look in other directions at the moment. He has, with what can be regarded as a form of fear, a feeling that if the EU does not show more presence in the region, the natural outcome is that others will. He stated: “(...) Clearly, in all of these meetings I have with EU officials, it's when you are absent that the strategic void will be filled by somebody else. And that is a euphemism, everybody knows whom we are speaking about, and third countries have used that, including vaccine diplomacy, and misusing the bad situation in which all of us have been found with the unprecedented pandemic, never seen in the last century or so. They started to fill that void, that empty space. So I'm asking for Europe to be more present in the Western Balkans. I am not asking for immediate membership. I am asking for the right to start the process”<sup>80</sup>. Thus, he is indirectly saying that he understands how other states like China and Russia, have increased its influence in the region, and in that matter, he is hoping that the EU would step up their presence in the region, as he considers the EU way ‘the best’. The same point is made by the former president of North Macedonia, Gjorge Ivanov, who shares the opinion that the EU has been too slow in the WB6, and that he understands the influence of others in the region. He stated: “(...) The European Union is leaving its door open for the Chinese and the Russian strategic encroachment in the Balkans because of its abject failure to engage and invest in the region. Until recently, we have not seen any Russian investment in Macedonia. But as Europe is withdrawing – or rather not keeping its promises about making the Balkans part of the European Union – it's like a call from the EU to come and fill in that space”<sup>81</sup>. That both the current and former president shares the same opinion of the EU being too slow, could be regarded, as that they want the European integration, but that they won't wait forever for it to happen. In that matter, it can be argued that the elites of North Macedonia are mostly tilted towards the EU, but not for much longer.

#### 4.5.6 Albania

Together with North Macedonia, Albania is one of the WB6 states with the least amount of Chinese influence, which could give the indication that they are pushing further towards European Integration. When considering what has happened in Albania for the last couple of years, combined with some statements from

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<sup>79</sup> Parrock, Jack. 2021. *The President of North Macedonia calls for more EU presence in the Balkans*. Euronews. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/29/the-president-of-north-macedonia-calls-for-more-eu-presence-in-the-balkans>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> EWB, 2017. *Ivanov: EU's failure in the Balkans is used by Russia and China*. European Western Balkans. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/05/ivanov-eus-failure-balkans-used-russia-china/>

official elites of the states, it seems like Albania wants to push for European Integration. The current president, Ilir Meta, has for example stated the following about the corruption the country has faced for several years: "(...) I am fighting for the rule of law in Albania. I am fighting for the rule of democracy against a one-party regime that has usurped every independent institution in this country and now wants to grab the constitutional court<sup>82</sup>". In that matter, Albania has extended a vetting process in the state, which has the goal of screening the state for corruption and organized crime. In accordance with that, they want to align with EU standards, and some officials has even been removed or retired after the introduction to the vetting process, which might be because they fear the accusations of corruption<sup>83</sup>. In addition to the statements and the vetting process, which favors the European integration in Albania, the current prime minister has also voiced his opinion on the Albanian way into the EU. He has stated that Albania even wants to go for a solo run towards the EU, whereas Albania earlier have been following North Macedonia, but due to the controversies with North Macedonia and its neighboring states, Albania cannot wait any longer for them. He stated the following: (...) "Albania cannot wait any longer for the two neighbors to resolve their quarrel ... Our course in that direction will fully change<sup>84</sup>". Thus, Albania really wants the EU accession process to speed up, because they can't wait much longer, which again indicates the impatience that some of the WB6 states have when it comes to the EU.

#### 4.5.7 Overview

When this project work around several different states, it is important to keep in mind that all of these states have different views, when it comes to the EU and China. As it can be seen in the first section of the overview, the amount of Chinese influence differs from state to state. The same can be said when it comes to the WB6s perception of how they prefer European integration, or if they prefer influence from other states. In that matter, it can be argued that three categories can be created in this situation. The first one being *favors European integration*. The second category can be regarded as *Neutral*, whereas the last category can be regarded as *favors influence of other regions*. First and foremost, the state of Serbia can be categorized in the third category, as they are the state who have spoken the most positively about the Chinese influence, but at the same time being negative towards the EU. Secondly, states such as Albania and North Macedonia, and especially Kosovo tend to be tilted the most towards the European way, as it seems like they are 'afraid'

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<sup>82</sup> Jamieson, Alastair. 2020. *Albania president Ilir Meta: my country could become the 'North Korea of Europe' again*. Euronews. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/27/albania-president-ilir-meta-my-country-is-becoming-the-north-korea-of-europe>

<sup>83</sup> Sinoruka, Fjori. 2022. *Albania Parliament Extends Mandate of Justice-Vetting Bodies*. BalkanInsight. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/10/albania-parliament-extends-mandate-of-justice-vetting-bodies/>

<sup>84</sup> Euronews, 2022. *Albania could push for solo EU membership bid, says PM Edi Rama*. Euronews. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/07/albania-could-push-for-solo-eu-membership-bid-says-pm-edi-rama>



of the rising influence of other states, when the EU has shown absence. Lastly, the last couple of states can be regarded as neutral, as they do not favor Chinese investments over European integration. It seems like they find both solutions fitting for them in a political and economical way.

Thus, this relatively long chapter was made, in order to understand the situation, the relationships, the projects, the investments that has been made in the WB6 from the EU and China, and the WB6 elites' perception on the EU and China. Hopefully, this will contribute to a better understanding, when reading the analysis of this project.

## 5. Analysis

The relationship and situation between the EU and China regarding the WB6 are a comprehensive and difficult relationship to interpret right away. In that matter, the foundation of the analysis is two individual and different hypothesis, which overall goal is to forward a theoretical discussion, in order to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between the two actors regarding the WB6-states. It must be mentioned that the EU in this project is considered as 'one actor' even though it consists of several states. In that matter, state-like actions will be interpreted from China and the EU. The two hypotheses' will be discussed separately. However, all the chosen theories will come to play for the different hypotheses. The two hypotheses are:

- The economic influence in the WB6 from China and the EU can be regarded as a rivalry
- The economic and political influence in the WB6 from the EU and China is a state of the free and liberal world

What was discovered in the overview chapter, was that the level and type of relationship to the WB6-states from respectively the EU and China are different in several ways. Firstly, when it comes to the EU, the relationship between the EU and the WB6-states are, among other, built on the premise that the WB6-states one day will become EU member states (some of the states are already considered candidate countries). In addition to that, several of the investments and projects initiated by the EU in the WB6-states, are done in specific ways, which will enhance the European integration in these states. This is, among other, the enhancement of democracy, freedom, human rights, and, that the WB6-states are getting a better understanding of EU mechanics such as trade, tax, sustainability, and the green agenda. These projects are, among other, the IPAs, IPARD; COSME, and CUSTOMS 20202. Secondly, it is not only physical projects and investments that is made by the EU in the WB6-states. Some of the projects include a level of European 'togetherness', which ultimately has the goal of enhancing the feeling of 'being European'. This is among other projects, where culture and art are exchanged between the EU and WB6, but also projects, where students and teachers can travel to states, and in that way learn European citizens and getting a feeling of

the free movement. In other ways, projects such as Erasmus+, gives young students (and teachers), the possibility to experience the 'greats' of the EU. These types of projects, with huge investments are, among other, Erasmus+ and Creative Europe. On the other hand, is the projects and investments from China in the WB6-states. Where the projects by the EU were built on enhancing the European integration and 'togetherness', the projects and investments from China seems a bit different. When taking a glance at the Chinese projects, it seems like that they don't have any requirements to the WB6-states on norms and values, which is the case by the European projects. Many of the projects made by China, is in accordance with their huge infrastructure project called Road and Belt Initiative (BRI), which can be interpreted in two ways. One way is, that China and the involved states are brought closer together through these infrastructure projects, which enhances the economy of the involved actors, but on the other hand, it can also be interpreted as China wanting to gain as much economic power outside their own borders. That China is looking to enhance their economic influence without any requirements in these projects, while the EU want to enhance the European Integration in the WB6-states is interesting to look at, and to consider, if the EU and China are in rivalry over getting the most amount of influence in the WB6. This leads to the first hypothesis of this project.

### 5.1 The economic influence in the WB6 from China and the EU can be regarded as a rivalry

Firstly, before digging deeper into the data and the 'answering' of this hypothesis, it is interesting to look upon, how the theories of this project see the term of rivalry. The neorealist scholar, John Mearsheimer describes the state of rivalry as:

"All great powers, be they democracies or not, have little choice but to compete for power in what is at root a zero-sum game<sup>85</sup>".

In this case, the great powers would be China and the EU. When it comes to trade, China is the largest power in the world, where the EU comes second<sup>86</sup>. When it comes to global GDP, the Chinese economy are again the number one, where the EU (combination of all member states) comes third after the U.S. as second<sup>87</sup>. When considering the statement from Mearsheimer, there is no doubt that the EU and China is in some kind

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<sup>85</sup> Mearsheimer, John. 2021. *The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power politics*. Foreign Affairs, vol. 100, issue 6, p. 48-58.

<sup>86</sup> The European Union. 2021. *Facts and figures on the European Union economy*. European-Union. Accessed April 7, 2022. [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/key-facts-and-figures/economy\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/key-facts-and-figures/economy_en)

<sup>87</sup> EuroStat. 2017. *China, US, and EU are the largest economies in the world*. Eurostat. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10868691/2-19052020-BP-EN.pdf/bb14f7f9-fc26-8aa1-60d4-7c2b509dda8e>

of rivalry in the WB6-states, or at least in a sort of competition for power, because the two actors can be considered as great powers. This could, among other, be competition for economic power, but also geopolitical power, because the WB6 combined have access to the Adriatic Sea. From the data acquired, the Chinese investments has not only been targeted at port projects and companies, but majority of the investments and projects has been infrastructure and power-sources. However, the scenario of China (or at least a Chinese company) owning a European port is not uncommon. The Chinese shipping company, Cosco, currently owns 67% of the Piraeus Port in Greece<sup>88</sup>. In addition to the harbors inside the EU (the Adriatic Sea), the WB6 can, for China, also be seen as a gateway into the EU. China knows that these states are set, at some day, to become EU member states. Then, if China owns a lot of infrastructure, power-plants etc., then it could be argued, that the Chinese investments and projects can be regarded as a chess game, where China want to position themselves in the best way possible against the EU. Then again, the Belt and Road project, can be regarded as a way, for China, to gain much access within some future EU member states, that negotiations for China with the EU are unavoidable. To this argument, John Mearsheimer has stated the following:

“China’s highly ambitious “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which was launched in 2013, is designed not just to help China sustain its impressive economic growth, but also to project Chinese military and political power around the globe<sup>89</sup>”

Thus, it can be argued, that the Chinese investments in WB6 (but also in other states around the world), is made for them to not only increase economic growth, but also military and political power around the world, and specifically outside of Asia. The EU, and leaders of EU member states, on the other hand, are not silent when it comes to the Chinese projects and investments. First and foremost, the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated, that “(...) the Western Balkans are part of the same Europe as the European Union. The EU is not complete without them<sup>90</sup>”. This statement is a further example of the overall goal, which is that the WB6-states one day will become member states of the EU. However, as mentioned before, some leaders of the EU member states, and MEPs of the EU have not been silent about the Chinese influence and investments in these six states. Some have even expressed the situation as worrying for the EU. Examples of these are:

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<sup>88</sup> Rogers, Davgid. 2022. *Greek supreme court halts Chinese plans to expand port of Piraeus*. Global Construction Review. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/greek-supreme-court-halts-chinese-plans-to-expand-port-of-piraeus/>

<sup>89</sup> Mearsheimer, John. 2019. p. 47

<sup>90</sup> Gadzo, Mersiha. 2021. *As EU hopes fade, Russia, China fill voids across Western Balkans*. Aljazeera. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/with-no-eu-strategy-russia-china-fill-void-in-western-balkans>

*“(...) either Europe extends the hand, and pulls these countries towards us or someone else will extend the hand and pull the countries in a different direction<sup>91</sup>” – Arturs Krisjanis, Prime minister of Latvia*

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*“(...) Measures here are to ensure that the Western Balkans do not become a sphere of influence of the Russian Federation or other great powers such as the People’s Republic of China<sup>92</sup>” – Karl Nehammer, Chancellor of Austria*

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*“If the EU doesn't expand, others will expand<sup>93</sup>” – Janez Jansa, Slovenian Prime minister*

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*“(...) favor the economic integration of the region; develop human exchange, raise the issue of minorities present in the region, but also fight against influence and manipulation who want to destabilise Europe through the Balkans<sup>94</sup>” – Emmanuel Macron, President of France.*

These statements are only a few examples of many, where leaders have expressed their concerns of the delayed and slow progress of European Integration in the WB6, as other powers, primarily China and Russia, has the chance to progress on their influence in the region. This is also a clear indicator of a rivalry between the EU and China, and that some of the European leaders are aware of the rivalry. Another statement from the EU, which clearly indicate China as a ‘systemic rival’ is from 2019, where the EU described China as:

*“an economic competitor in pursuit of technological leadership and a **systemic rival** promoting alternative models of governance.<sup>95</sup>”*

Thus, the EU must do something, to position themselves better than China, when it comes to these states, especially when some of the Chinese projects has not followed the international rules of human rights etc., which were presented in the overview chapter. Here again, the metaphor of the chess game can be used. These statements also indicate that some of the European leaders acknowledge that the presence of China

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Kurmeyer, Nikolaus J, 2022. *Protect Western Balkans from Putin, EU leaders tell Biden*. Euractiv. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/protect-western-balkans-from-putin-eu-leaders-tell-biden/>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> EWB, 2021. *Macron urges for “clarifying” EU perspective of the WB, announces conference in June*. Europeanwesternbalkans. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/10/macron-urges-for-clarifying-eu-perspective-of-the-wb-announces-conference-in-june/>

<sup>95</sup> Von der Burchard, Hans. 2019. *EU slams China as ‘systemic rival’ as trade tension rises*. Politico. Accessed April 11, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-slams-china-as-systemic-rival-as-trade-tension-rises/>

in the WB6 is already there, and the EU must do something to minimize their future presence. They might fear, that if a state like China gets too much influence in a region of Western Balkan (in the middle of the EU), that region would have a complete opposite viewpoint of the values and norms such as democracy and human rights (where the WB6 are already behind the EU). In addition to this, the EU has actually launched an initiative, which is focused to 'counter' the Chinese investments and projects in the WB6. The project is called 'Global Gateway'. It must be mentioned that the project is not only centered around the WB6, but rather the whole world. The budget of the project is estimated at about EUR 300 billion, where about the budget of this to the WB6 is about EUR 30 billion. Ursula von der Leyen has stated that the WB6-states already has experienced investments and projects from China, but she points out, that the WB6 needs "different and better offers<sup>96</sup>". The project is meant to be for infrastructure, healthcare, and education, which were some of the areas, where China also invested. Von der Leyen further stated: "(...) We are present, and it is known that our work is transparent, well managed, that it will not lead to unsustainable debts, that the projects are planned together with the partner-countries, so that the local communities would have actual benefits from the infrastructure, but also to bring, through these projects, the private sector, which doesn't exist in China. This is a true alternative<sup>97</sup>". Here, the president of the European Commission refers to the Chinese projects, which has put some of the WB6-states in debts, which seem impossible to repay. This is a clear counteraction from the EU to China, but it is also an indication of how the EU regards the Chinese investments and influence in the region as a form of threat, or a potential to evolve into one. This further exemplifies that the EU regards China as a form of rival when it comes to the WB6. Furthermore, the issue of Western Balkan and EU integration in a combination with the Chinese influence in the region has also been a point of discussion for the European Parliament. A discussion in the European Parliament took place on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The main point of discussion was cooperation on the fight against organized crime in the Western Balkan. However, several of the MEPs mentioned the economic influence of China (and Russia to some extent), as a threat to the main point of discussion, but also to the WB6 integration into the EU. One point, made by Dorien Rookmaker, from the ECR group, stated the following during the discussion: "(...) Kosovo has been an independent country since 2008. It has since then been recognized by the United States. However, in the EU, certain Member States have still not recognized Kosovo for petty, nationalistic reasons. I fully agree with the rapporteur. Depriving Western Balkan countries of an EU perspective will worsen the situation concerning

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<sup>96</sup> Tanjug. 2021. *EU wants to match Chinese investments in Western Balkan – EUR 30 billion for infrastructure, healthcare, Education within Global Gateway Strategy*. Ekapija. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/3499614/eu-wants-to-match-chinese-investments-in-western-balkans-eur-30-billion>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

organized crime. It gives Russia and China the opportunity to further destabilise the region<sup>98</sup>". The statement from Rookmaker can indicate, that China (and Russia) according to her, already is in the process of destabilizing the region. The statement by Rookmaker was not the only one, where the relationship between WB6 and China were brought up. Nicolae Ștefănuță, from the Renew Group, has stated that China (and Russia) are ready to fill in the gap, if the EU does not do more about the integration process in the region. He stated the following: "(...) Thirdly, there is no vacuum in international relations. One wrong move and Russia will exploit it. One misstep and China will give billions away and seek influence in the region and demand it too. Let's unblock the Western Balkans' path towards EU accession and not let others open a new front right here in our wing. Let's not give the green light to criminal groups to benefit from emergency situations such as COVID and not let them counterfeit vaccines and vaccination cards. Let's establish stronger links with civil society<sup>99</sup>". These statements are an indication, that some of the MEPs have a 'fear' of what will happen, if nothing is done in the region, and what will happen if states like China gets too much influence in the states. In that matter, some MEPs might argue, that China can be categorized as a rival for the EU. These statements and projects could be regarded as a part of neorealism, where actions are done in relative to other powers. Thus, the actions that needs to be done, according to the 'worried' EU-leaders, would follow the assumptions of relative-gains, which in this case would be, that China would achieve greater power than the EU, if the EU does not do anything about the situation.

However, these concerns and statements are only from officials from the EU. This indicates that the relationship can be considered as a rivalry, from the EU perspective, but how is it considered from the Chinese perspective? In addition to that, it is important to take a glance upon, how this potential rivalry is set. When observing the two actors (the EU and China) actions in the WB6, the approach is completely different. The EU, want to integrate the states into the norms and values, which is important for the EU, in order for these states to become member states in the future. Thus, the EU are influencing the WB6 not only financially, but also politically and culturally. On the other hand, China is not doing big projects (when considering the data from the overview chapter), that has the overall goal of influencing the WB6s politically and culturally. However, it seems that the Chinese projects are 'only' in order for China to expand their economy, with the help of infrastructure projects. Because the two actors are not 'competing' in the exact same way, and goal for that matter, the relationship could be called an indirect rivalry, instead of traditionally rivalry, where two actors are competing for the same outcome.

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<sup>98</sup> European Parliament. 2021. *Cooperation on the fight against organized crime in the Western Balkans (continuation of debate)*. Debates, European Parliament. Accessed April 29, 2022.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-12-14-ITM-016\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-12-14-ITM-016_EN.html)

<sup>99</sup> European Parliament. 2021. *Cooperation on the fight against organized crime in the Western Balkans (debate)*.

Debates, European Parliament. Accessed April 29, 2022. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-12-14-ITM-014\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-12-14-ITM-014_EN.html)

However, this is the neorealist viewpoint of rivalry/conflict, which makes it interesting to take a look upon, how the theory of neoliberalism has its take on this issue. Where the EU statements above follow the neorealist assumptions that the conflict in the WB6 are a win or lose situation, the theory of neoliberalism would argue that the Chinese projects and investments necessarily aren't a sign of a rivalry, but rather that the Chinese investments and projects indicate that China is willing to follow liberal norms on trade and cooperation. It must be kept in mind, that regarding to neoliberalism, cooperation and interdependence is an important tool to avoid such rivalry and conflict, which the statements above proclaim. In that matter, it is interesting to observe, if other statements from European leaders are made, which argue that the influence of China in the region is a good thing for the future global scene. Some of these statements, would completely contradict the statements above, who argued that the Chinese presence in the WB6 is a terrible thing for European integration in these countries. However, it has not been possible to find statements likes these from EU leaders or leaders of EU member states. Even though barely anything good has been said from the EU perspective, the silence still 'says something'. The silence on this side of the perspective might indicate, that there is a consensus within the EU, that the situation between China and the EU, when it comes to the WB6, can be considered as a problem, and maybe even as a rivalry. In that matter, the neorealist approach to the EU side of this relationship might be the best option. However, it's not only up to the EU to decide if the relationship can be considered as a rivalry. It is also important to take a look at, how China sees this relationship. Do China consider the situation as a rivalry or are they solely doing projects and investments for their own good. Do China see the WB6 as a win or lose situation? These are some questions, which are difficult to answer due to the rather limited amount of official Chinese statements on the topic. However, the Chinese actions in the WB6 can be interpreted in several ways. Some might argue that the investments and projects are only economical projects for China, which will enhance the 'belt and road initiative', and at the same time develop several workplaces in these states, which is good in many ways. If that is the case, China probably wouldn't consider the relationship between them and the EU as a rivalry, when considering the WB6. As of now, the biggest trade-partners for the WB6 are the EU, by far. However, some might also argue that the projects, investments, and actions in the WB6s, done by China, are long term projects, which in the long run would tip the WB6-states to develop further relations with China. This can be argued because of the big infrastructure, energy, and other projects combined with the several cultural projects, that has been initiated in the WB6. This is the projects, which were briefly expressed in the overview chapter. This is among other, the Confucius Institutes in several of the major cities and universities within the WB6, which provides courses in Chinese culture and language and often hosts public events on China-related political, social, and economic topics. These courses and events, could slowly, but effectively influence the citizens of the WB6s perception of China.

Another aspect, which in combination with the economic projects and investments of China, is tourism. Because of the fact, that the WB6-states aren't member states of the EU, they have a rather relaxed visa-policy to China, compared to the one of the EU. Thus, several of the WB6-states have visa-free connections to China, which means that tourism in these states from China is rising<sup>100</sup>. In that matter, I wouldn't say that China would consider the institutions and European development-process from the EU to the WB6 a threat or a state of rivalry, when it comes to the Chinese financial projects and investments in the region. However, China might know, that if they can get as much influence in the region, before the WB6 become EU member states, then the Chinese relationship with the EU might increase, due to the interdependence of Chinese firms, infrastructure, and tourists in the potential upcoming EU member states. However, the EU has addressed the issue of the visa-free policies, with China, of some of the WB6-states. This is, among other, addressed in the European Commission country reports of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. The European Commission stresses, that if these states want to align with the EU acquis, they need to visa-free policies between them and China (and other states)<sup>101</sup>. This again, would indicate that the EU sees the different types of Chinese influence as a kind of threat.

In that matter, the economic situation in the WB6, and the relationship between the EU and China can in the matter of neorealism, be interpreted in different ways. In the perspective of the EU, it might be interpreted more as a rivalry, than from the Chinese side. Thus, the EU, and some European leaders, have stated that the EU must do something soon to stop the Chinese influence in the region – which can be considered as a rivalry. However, from the Chinese perspective, it seems like China 'just' wants to maximize their potential economic outcome when doing deals with the states, which are in correlation with their 'belt and road' initiative. In addition to that, it does not seem like China are caring for relative gains, as they know that EU still is the biggest partner of the WB6, however, it seems like they want to be a part of the states, before they become EU member states. This aspect ties well together with the theory of complex interdependence, which were introduced earlier in the project. In this case, it would mostly be to the first branch of the theory, which states that *multiple channels connect societies*. It could be visualized, as Chinese companies are getting involved with the states, in the development of infrastructure projects, powerplant, ports, etc., which later (potentially) will be infrastructure of the EU. In that matter, it would maybe be arguable, that China has the goal of becoming even more interdependent with the EU through the WB6, before they become member states of the EU.

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<sup>100</sup> Raspor, Andrej et. al. 2018. *Chinese tourists in Western Balkan: facts and forecast*. Perfectus, Svetovanje in izobraževanje. Dolga Poljana.

<sup>101</sup> European Commission. 2021. (3). *Commission Staff Working Document – Albania 2021 report*. European Commission



In that matter, and lastly, the EU does not seem as big of a rival for China, as China seems like a rival for the EU. This can be argued, because (some) leaders of the EU has expressed their concerns with China in the WB6s, because of the lack of European values and norms, whereas almost nothing has been said from a Chinese point of view. Thus, the relationship between the EU and China, from the EU perspective, might follow the neorealists assumption of a rivalry, whereas the relationship from a Chinese perspective is more tilted towards the neoliberal and complex interdependence side, where they want as much influence as possible in the region before the nations becomes EU member states. The next hypothesis follows this assumption about the interdependence between the two actors, when it comes to the WB6. Maybe China wants to get as much influence in the WB6, before they become member states of the EU, in order for China to become more interdependent with the EU.

## 5.2 The economic and political influence in the WB6 from the EU and China is a state of the free and liberal world order

In the last section, it was discussed if the situation in the WB6 between the EU and China could be categorized as a state of rivalry. It can be argued that some parts of the relationship can be labeled as a rivalry, but it would also be interesting to find points, which could argue that the influence from the EU and China in WB6 can be explained through what is considered as the liberal international order. In that matter, Ikenberry defines the liberal international order as: “(...) multilayered, multifaceted, and not simply a political formation imposed by the leading state. International order is not ‘one thing’ that states either join or resist. It is an aggregation of various sorts of ordering rules and institutions. There are the deep rules and norms of sovereignty... There is a sprawling array of international institutions, regimes, treaties, agreements, protocols, and so forth. These governing arrangements cut across diverse realms, including security and arms control, the world economy, the environment and global commons, human rights, and political relations. Some of these domains of governance may have rules and institutions that narrowly reflect the interests of the hegemonic state, but most reflect negotiated outcomes based on a much broader set of interests”<sup>102</sup>. Thus, according to Ikenberry, the liberal international order is, among other, built up upon institutions, regimes, treaties etc., which all have shared and agreed upon rules and norms, which the participants of the order must follow. In that matter, it would be interesting to take a look upon, which international institutions that China, the EU, and the WB6 are a part of. This will primarily be institutions with an economical and human rights aspect. This would be interesting, because these institutions might be a critical factor, of why and how the EU and China can do investments and projects in the WB6. In that matter, the indirect rivalry

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<sup>102</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2018. *Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive*. Ethics & International Affairs. 32 (1): p. 17-29.

mentioned in the last chapter, would partially be a result of the liberal international order. Here, a short list of the common international institutions will be shown, where the member states of the EU, China and the WB6 all are members. After that, the common values of these institutions will be mentioned, in order to see, if these institutions facilitate the activities of the EU and China in WB6. The EU, China and the WB6 are a part of:

- The United Nations: UN (except Kosovo)
- The International Monetary Fund: IMF
- World Trade Organization: WTO
- The World Bank

### *The United Nations*

The UN has three overall core values, with several core value having sub-values under them. These three overall values are integrity, respect for diversity, and professionalism<sup>103</sup>. These overall goals are leading the members of the UN to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations between them, to solve international problems, to promote respect for human rights, and to be the center of coordination of nations' actions<sup>104</sup>, which all are describing the purposes of the UN. The UN was created in 1945 after the second world war and was meant to secure peace through cooperation interdependence between states. Thus, the UN is a good example of an institution which follows the neoliberal theory, as peace is secured by cooperation between states, where sets of common norms and rules are agreed upon. Furthermore, the UN also follows the theory of Complex Interdependence, as different aspects of the institutions touch upon multiple channels within a state, among other health issues, economic issues, and human rights issues. When it comes to China and the UN, it must be mentioned that China is a permanent member of the UN security council. The permanent membership of the security council makes China a very powerful state within the UN. Even though the security council only deals with security issues, the permanent seat in the security council still shows how big a power China is on the world stage. The powerful position of China within the UN, but also other institutions, will be touched upon later. The EU also has a representative as a permanent member of the security council in France<sup>105</sup>.

### *The International Monetary Fund*

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<sup>103</sup> United Nations. 2022. *The United Nations Global Compact Way*. United Nations Global Compact. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about/the-un-global-compact-way>

<sup>104</sup> Forenede Nationer. 2022. *Information om FN*. De forenede nationer. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://unric.org/da/information-om-fn/>

<sup>105</sup> United Nations Security Council. 2022. *Current members – Permanent and non-permanent members*. The United Nations. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/current-members>

IMF is an international organization, which is responsible for managing the global financial system and for lending money to its members to address balance of payments problems. Efforts within this fund is particularly directed at countries in severe economic difficulties. Thus, IMF is responsible for fair financing around the world for its members. Furthermore, IMF works to achieve sustainable growth and prosperity for all of its 190 members. The fund does so by supporting economic policies which promote financial stability and monetary cooperation, which are essential to increase productivity, job creation, and economic well-being. The fund has three critical missions which are furthering international monetary cooperation, encouraging the expansion of trade and economic growth, and discouraging policies that would harm prosperity<sup>106</sup>. These projects, actions, and investments of the EU and China in the WB6 follows some of these missions, which the IMF has. If the investments, projects, and economic actions of the EU and China in the WB6 would increase the job creation and economic well-being for their citizens will be discussed later.

### *The World Trade Organization*

The WTO is an international organization that regulate international trade by maintaining a forum for negotiating trade agreements and resolving trade disputes. The organization was founded in 1995, succeeding the previous organization GATT, which was established in 1948. The WTO has 164 member states all over the world<sup>107</sup>. The WTO strive after that its member states must follow five rules, which can be categorized as trade without discrimination, freer trade, predictability, promotion of fair competition, and encouraging of development and economic reform. This organization is mostly about trade between countries, and not about the investments and projects of a country in other places around the world.

### *The World Bank*

The international bank for reconstruction and development, commonly known as the World Bank, is an international organization whose original purpose was to fund the post-World War II reconstruction. Today, the task of the World Bank is to fight poverty, by funding states. The way that the world bank fights poverty, is that the organization is lending money to the governments of its poorer members in order to improve their economies and to improve the standard of living of the people within these states. In that matter, when a poorer state economy is strengthened, it would also have a positive outcome for the other members of the organization. The World Bank has been a key development partner in the WB6, and the organization has supported these states during the period of economic transition and early reforms. In addition to that, the

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<sup>106</sup> IMF. 2022. *What is the IMF*. International monetary fund. Accessed April 21, 2022.

<https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/IMF-at-a-Glance>

<sup>107</sup> WTO. 2022. *Principles of the trading system*. The World Trade Organization – About WTO. Accessed April 21, 2022.

[https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/whatis\\_e/tif\\_e/fact2\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact2_e.htm)

World Bank has also led the post-conflict reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Furthermore, the World Bank is, to this day, a supporter of the EU accession path of the WB6, and the organization helps these countries to address their main development constraints<sup>108</sup>. Thus, the World Bank is a supporter of the European projects and the accession process of the WB6 to the EU, but that does not mean, that the World Bank is an opponent of the Chinese projects and investments in the Western Balkans.

This were a brief introduction of the main objective of some of the international institutions were all the actors of this project is present. In the next sections, it will be discovered, what the perspectives on these institutions are from the viewpoint of the chosen theories. The liberal international order, which among other consists of international organizations, is a key component of the theory of neoliberalism and complex interdependence. Ikenberry has stated that the liberal international order, consisting of international institutions is easy to join, but relatively difficult to leave because of the creation of interdependence between the states involved in the institutions<sup>109</sup>. In that matter, and in accordance with the relationship between the EU and China, when it comes to the WB6, it can be argued that the relationship, and the potential rivalry discussed in the last section can be regarded as a result of the liberal international order. The fact that both China, the EU members, and the WB6 are members of these international institutions, gives the indication that the states are on a level playfield, and in that matter, the Chinese projects and investments can be regarded as a rivalry situation from the perspective of the EU, but only because the liberal order allows it, because the interdependence that the institutions create in several aspects. Furthermore, the theory of complex interdependence, and its three branches, follows this situation very well. In that matter, the relationship between the EU and China, when it comes to the WB6 and when considering the participation within the different organizations and institutions, follows the factors of 1) multiple channels connect societies, 2) absence of hierarchy among issues and 3) minor role of military force. Firstly, the several transnational organizations can be regarded as some of the multiple channels, which connects the societies of the EU, China, and the Western Balkans together. Furthermore, the absence of hierarchy is visible within the focus and missions of the several institutions, which all have different targets of outcome and visions. In that regard, when considering the different channels which connects the societies, none of them is more important than another. Secondly, the relationship between the EU and China follows the theory of complex interdependence, at least when it comes to the relationship over the WB6, because of the minor role of

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<sup>108</sup> WTO. 2022. *Western Balkans Program Overview*. The World Bank. Accessed April 21, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/vienna-see-program-overview>

<sup>109</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, Crises, and Transformation of the American Order*. Princeton: Princeton University press, p. 186.

military force. This can be said, as none of the projects and investments done by the EU and China are forced militarily.

Furthermore, most of the EU member states have been members of these institutions for many years, which is the same for China. However, China was 'late' in joining the World Trade Organization, which they joined in 2000<sup>110</sup>. Some of the hopes, back then, from the western democracies, was that the inclusion of China into the WTO would be a milestone that could be a tool to change the social/communist political structure of China, as the neoliberalist theory argues, that trade-relations and interdependence between countries is a great factor for a country to convert into a modern democracy. Furthermore, the inclusion of China into these institutions would give the additional member states the hopes, that it would increase the absolute gains of the states involved within the institutions. However, that has not happened in China, where the Chinese Communist Party has ruled the country for centuries<sup>111</sup>. The inclusion of China into the WTO, but also the other institutions have without a doubt opened its borders for trade and investments, which has enhanced the cooperation between the EU and China, but not severely changed the Chinese political position. In that matter, the neorealist theory would here argue, that because of the inclusion of China into institutions, such as the WTO, the relationship between the EU and China, in some respects such as the situation in the WB6, can be considered as a rivalry. Furthermore, the neorealists theory argue, that the liberal international order invites the 'big powers' to cheat, when it comes to the rules and norms of the institutions. Mearsheimer states, that international orders are "(...) an organized group of international institutions that help govern the interactions among the member states<sup>112</sup>". He further argues that these orders are managed by the great powers, and that they are managed to achieve the interests of the great powers. This is further explained by how neorealism views the international institutions, as they are viewed as building blocks the international order, and in that matter, Mearsheimer defines institutions, such as the WTO, IMF, and the World Bank, as: "(...) effectively rules that the great powers devise and agree to follow, because they believe that obeying those rules is in their interest. The rules prescribe acceptable kinds of behavior and proscribe unacceptable forms of behavior"<sup>113</sup>. Furthermore, the neorealist theory argues that cooperation and institutions with several members, are bound not to succeed, because there always will be a kind of mistrust between the states. The mistrust to China, from the EU perspective is visible in the several of statements from the last chapter, where EU leaders expressed their concerns with China. These concerns could be, among other, because that China is not a democracy like the standard democracy of the EU. In that regard, the mistrust

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<sup>110</sup> Mufson, Steven. 2001. *China asked to join the WTO, Didn't it?*. Washington Post. Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2001/04/29/china-asked-to-join-the-wto-didnt-it/3f665394-79c1-4faa-ab00-6ce05fcc8a63/>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. 2019. p. 7-50.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

from EU to China, when it comes to the WB6, might be that the WB6 would tend to follow the Chinese standards of democracy, if the Chinese investments and projects in the region is intensified. If we turn it around. If a great power, which follows the norms and values of the EU were doing the projects and investments in the WB, would there still be worrying statements from the EU leaders, like the ones presented in the last chapter. It must be mentioned that the 'threat' does only seem to be from the EU's perspective, as no worrying statements have appeared from China, when it comes to the influence of EU in the WB6. Furthermore, the theory of neorealism argue that states fear that powerful states can cheat about the following of rules and norms, which would hinder states from entering collaboration, why the theory argues that these institutions are difficult to sustain<sup>114</sup>. This might also be the case of the Chinese presence in the WB6, where some of the projects contained miserable working conditions for workers, some of them imported from Vietnam. These incidents are in correlation with the realist view upon international institutions, that the powerful states can cheat and ignore the agreed upon rules and norms. The contradictions between the EU and China in terms of norms is not only present regarding the WB6-states. An earlier clash between the EU and China has been seen, in the case of Xinjiang in China, where terrible life-conditions were seen to some minorities, such as Muslims. In this case, which reached public attention primarily on 2021, the EU did put up personal sanctions against Chinese representatives in Xinjiang as a response to the activities. In response to these sanctions, China also launched some personal sanctions against several European, as China stated that the sanctions targeted against them were "(...) based on nothing but lies and disinformation, disregards and distorts facts<sup>115</sup>". This might be an underlining of the mistrust between great actors within the international institutions, which in according to neorealism, is unavoidable within the institutions. In that matter, when it comes to the working conditions for some of the foreign workers within the WB6, it does not seem like the EU has 'done' anything about it, but earlier clashes between the EU and China show, that the EU are willing to address the problems of human rights, when it comes to China.

The president of the EU council, Charles Michel, has stated to the UN general assembly, that the EU has major differences with China over key values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, which are the EU's "compass" for action. He further stressed: "(...) We, stand on the side of the fundamental values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and cooperation. It's our compass to pursue our interests"<sup>116</sup>. In that matter, and because of the fact that both the EU member states, the WB6, and China are a part of the

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<sup>114</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. 1994-1995. p. 13

<sup>115</sup> Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021. *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces Sanctions on Relevant EU Entities and Personnel*. Chinese ministry of foreign affairs. Accessed May 23, 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cohk/eng/Topics/fyrbt/t1863106.htm>

<sup>116</sup> Asianews. 2020. *Europe attacks China on human rights and trade*. Pime, AsiaNews. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Europe-attacks-China-on-human-rights-and-trade-51156.html>

mentioned above institutions, it could be argued that the liberal international order, has invited the WB6 to choose between, which side they prefer, which could invite to an indirect rivalry between the two actors. On the contrary, the idea of having 'different' member states within these institutions, is that some states, such as China, would develop their viewpoints upon these values such as democracy and human rights, and to push them into action. If that would be the case, in the near future, these investments and projects, done by China in the WB6, would maybe even improve the WB6 development of EU standards and norms, thus making European Integration more plausible. However, seen from the overview chapter Chinese influence in the WB6, it does not seem that China is pushing for promoting human rights, democracy, and rule of law, which would indicate that the indirect rivalry is the more 'fitting' scenario. However, if the agreed upon norms and rules were observed more carefully, and violations of the rules were punished more, then China might have a greater incentive to follow the rules and norms. Thus, then the 'threat' of China in the WB6, might not have been as realistic for the EU as of now. The quote from Charles Michel is a clear statement, that the EU stands by these values, such as human rights, which is critical when becoming a member state of the EU. The continuously stressing of the importance of these values, might be, among other, a signal to the WB6, that these values are a must, if they want to become members of the EU. The leaders of the EU are not interested in acquiring new member states, where the standards on these values are not fulfilled, especially after recent years with Hungary and Poland violating democratic values<sup>117</sup>. Thus, the promotion of these values is very important for the EU to its potential upcoming member states, but certainly also to its current member states. In that matter, when the WB6 have deals, investments, and projects with China, who according to the EU has fundamentally different viewpoints on democracy etc. can indirectly be regarded as a threat to the EU, because these states are set to join the EU in the future. However, when observing China and the EU in the international institutions, it is not only a negative picture which is painted. Besides the relationship between the EU and China about the WB6, it does seem like the two actors does cooperation on other issues, where the relationship between the two have a more positive background. China and the EU does, among other, cooperate about the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), and the two actors does also cooperate to ensure continued progress towards the Paris agreement targets<sup>118</sup>. With that in mind, it can be argued that the theory of complex interdependence could be implemented here. Thus, this could be a clear indication of the theory, where states are deeply interdependent with each other in many different areas, that they cooperate and have a healthy relationship, even though they might be

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<sup>117</sup> Baczyńska, Gabriela. 2022. *EU top court paves way to cut billions to Poland and Hungary*. Reuters. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-top-court-dismisses-polish-hungarian-rule-law-challenge-2022-02-16/>

<sup>118</sup> European Commission. 2022. (10) *International partnerships – China*. European Commission. Accessed May 16, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/china\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/china_en)

'rivals' in other areas. The area of complex interdependence, which states that there aren't any hierarchy among issues would also be visible here. If the issue of the European Integration process in the WB6 were the most important issue for the EU, then it could be argued that the EU would try to counteract the Chinese influence in that region even more aggressive than what they already have done. However, it seems like the issue of the WB6, for the EU, aren't a priority which overrules other issues, such as the environmental agenda. In that matter, it could be argued that the issue of dealing with the Chinese influence in the WB6 is a 'problem' for the EU, but because of the interdependence that the two actors have through multiple international institutions, the China-WB6 issue does not overrule the others. Thus, the aspect of the WB6 between China and the EU would primarily follow the neorealist view upon rivalry as its main characteristic, at least from the perspective of the EU when considering the statements from several EU-leaders. However, the liberal international order and the international institutions are in some aspects 'allowing' China to do these projects and investments in the WB6, which from the EU could seem as a threat, but at the same time the order allows the EU and China to cooperate in other issues, such as human rights, climate, education etc. This cooperation in 'other' aspects were visible during a video-meeting between the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, president of the European Council Charles Michel, and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The meeting between the three provided a strategic guidance for sustained and sound development of the relationship between the EU and China, as several agendas on cooperative issues were discussed. Topics of cooperative issues were, among other, with the UN at its core, to take the lead in the defending of the international system by defending the rule of law, cooperation on open economy and climate change that follows the purposes and principles of the UN, as well as cooperation on sustainable security. Additionally, Xi Jinping further stressed the Chinese position on the war in Ukraine. He stated that China always stands on the side of peace<sup>119</sup>, which is following the position on the EU. Thus, even though the EU has labeled China as an 'systemic rival' and have tried to counter the Chinese influence and actions in WB6, they are still progressing on cooperation on other aspects, such as the issues mentioned from the video-meeting between the three officials. This again is an underlining of the absence of hierarchy among issues in relation to the theory of complex interdependence. However, some aspects of neorealism can still be regarded within the liberal international order, such as additional development package to the WB6, which were set as a counter to the Chinese influence in the region.

Finally, and in accordance with the second hypothesis of this analysis, it can be said that the liberal international order can be regarded as a mutual 'playground', where the institutions facilitate trade agreements, exchange of knowledge etc., which also has intensified the projects and investments from

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<sup>119</sup> Xinhua. 2022. *Xiplomacy: Xi's remarks on boosting China-EU cooperation for world stability*. Xinhua, English. Accessed May 23, 2022. <https://english.news.cn/20220404/5434aff8c74546a489e011a5e4132f80/c.html>



respectively the EU and China in the WB6, but on the other hand, the international order has also, in some areas, followed the realists assumption, that some of the 'bigger players' within the institutions, can work around the agreed upon rules and norms. However, even though the bigger players might have the possibility to cheat without big consequences, the fact that the members of the institutions are connected to each other on several issues, a state of rivalry in one issue might not lead to conflict between two, or more actors, which is one of the principles of the theory of complex interdependence.

## 6. Conclusion

On the basis of the theoretical discussion with the foundation of the two hypotheses, and in accordance with the research question of this project, the following can be concluded. The relationship between the EU and China can be looked upon differently from setting to setting. In some settings, the relationship between the two superpowers can arguably be considered as positive and healthy, whereas other settings might be considered fragile and unhealthy. In accordance with that, this thesis wished to interpret, how the relationship between the EU and China can be considered, when primarily focusing on their actions in the states of WB6. In that matter, when analyzing several official statements with the combination of the overview chapter, which introduced the actions of the EU and China in the WB6, the following about the relationship can be concluded.

Of course, as with every relationship, the story, and the interpretation of each other might not be the exact same for both actors. This is also the case of the relationship between the EU and China, with the WB6 in the middle. As of the EU, given the fact that several leaders and MEPs have shared their concerns with the Chinese investments and projects in the WB6, it can be argued, that the EU sees the Chinese influence and projects in the WB6 as a threat and in that matter, a rivalry. What the majority of the worried statements are stressing, is that the EU needs to fill the 'void' in the middle Europe before other actors might get too much influence. These other actors are, among other, China and Russia. Not only the statements from these leaders are backing the argumentation, that the EU regards the relationship as a rivalry in this situation. The Global Gateway project, which were launched in 2021 and is a, according to Ursula von der Leyen "true alternative", to the Chinese projects and investments in WB6. Thus, the EU is actively stressing their concerns about the Chinese influence and actively and openly launched projects, which is meant to be an alternative to the Chinese projects and investments in the WB6. The reasoning for these types of counters from the EU, might be because the EU projects and investments comes with several requirements, which all has the goal of enhancing the integration into the EU for the WB6, whereas the Chinese projects are only associated with loans. In that matter, the relationship between the EU and China, when considering their actions in the WB6, can from the EU's perspective be argued to be labeled as a state of rivalry, which follows the neorealists point of view.

However, when interpreting the Chinese perspective on this relationship, the outcome can be interpreted a bit differently. From the Chinese perspective, it can be argued that their influence and projects aren't done in order to counter the European integration for the WB6, but that the Chinese influence in the region primarily can be considered as enhancing the economic position of China in accordance with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Due to the rather limited statements from official Chinese statesmen regarding their actions in the WB6, which might be because of the transparency of China, nothing really indicates, that China

is considering the relationship between them and EU as a rivalry, when focusing on their presence in WB6. Whereas the perspective of the EU could be argued to follow neorealist assumptions, it could be argued that the Chinese perspective on the relationship could follow the neoliberalist, where cooperation, interdependence, and trade are important. It could be argued, because no official statements regarding the relationship, to my knowledge, has been published. However, when considering some of the main priorities of BRI, some of them follows neoliberal assumptions. Some of the priorities are concerning the connectivity of people, coordination on policies, and unimpeded trade due to enhanced infrastructure in the concerned states. Thus, China might know that the EU have the goal of acquiring the WB6-states as EU member states someday, and in that matter, China might want to increase their presence and projects in the region before they become member states. In that matter, if the WB6 become EU member states one day, the EU and China would be even more connected to each other.

Furthermore, when observing the relationship between the EU and China from above, the relationship follows several aspects of the theory of Complex Interdependence. Firstly, both China and the EU member states are members of several common international institutions, which in this matter can be regarded as some of the multiple channels, which connects the societies between them, and for that matter also the WB6 states. Secondly, when observing the relationship between the EU and China, they are cooperating together on several issues, such as climate and human rights issues. In that matter, as mentioned in the beginning of the conclusion, some settings of the relationship could be looked upon in a positive way, whereas some other settings might seem to be tilted towards the more negative way. However, as the theory of complex interdependence argues, there aren't any hierarchy among issues between interdependent states. If there were to be a hierarchy among issues, in the case of the relationship between the two, it could be argued that the EU would try even harder to counter the Chinese influence in the WB6, when assuming that the EU regard the situation as a state of rivalry. In that matter, it is interesting that the EU earlier have had clashes with China, which led to sanctions between the two actors. This shows, that when some issues really contradict the values of the EU, they are not afraid to take drastic measures. In that matter, even if the relationship over WB6 with China from the EU perspective follows the neorealist assumption of rivalry, the issue isn't overruling some of the other settings of the relationship between them.

Finally, when the EU aren't 'trying' harder to counter China in the state of rivalry over the WB6, it might be because some of the Chinese projects in the long run are forward European integration in these states. This could be, the stabilization of the economies of the states, due to stronger connectivity and more focus on the environmental agenda, which are very important for the EU. Thus, even if China and the EU are different in many aspects, and some settings might be argued to be a state of rivalry, some of the Chinese projects might be able to forward one of the overall goals of the EU concerning the WB6, which Ursula von der Leyen

stressed in the introduction of this project: "(...) We want the Western Balkans in the European Union, there can be no doubt".

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 (values and GDP of the WB6 and the EU)

#### *Freedom (data obtained from 'freedomhouse.org')*

Point-system (from 0 to 100)

EU-average: 90,9

EU highest score: 100 (Sweden and Finland - Free)

EU lowest score: 69 (Hungary – partly free)

WB6 average: 61

WB6 highest score: 66 (Albania – Partly free)

WB6 lowest score: 53 (Bosnia and Herzegovina – Partly free)

#### *Democracy (data obtained from 'the Economist Intelligence Unit')*

Point-system (0,0-10)

EU-average: 7,51

EU highest score: 9,27 (Finland)

EU lowest score: 6,43 (Romania)

WB6 average: 5,91

WB6 highest score: 6,36 (Albania)

WB6 lowest score: 5,04 (Bosnia and Hercegovina)

It must be mentioned that Kosovo is excluded from this dataset.

#### *Rule of law (data obtained from 'World Justice Program')*

Point-system (0,0-1,0)

EU-average: 0,72

EU highest score: 0,90 (Denmark)

EU lowest: 0,52 (Hungary)

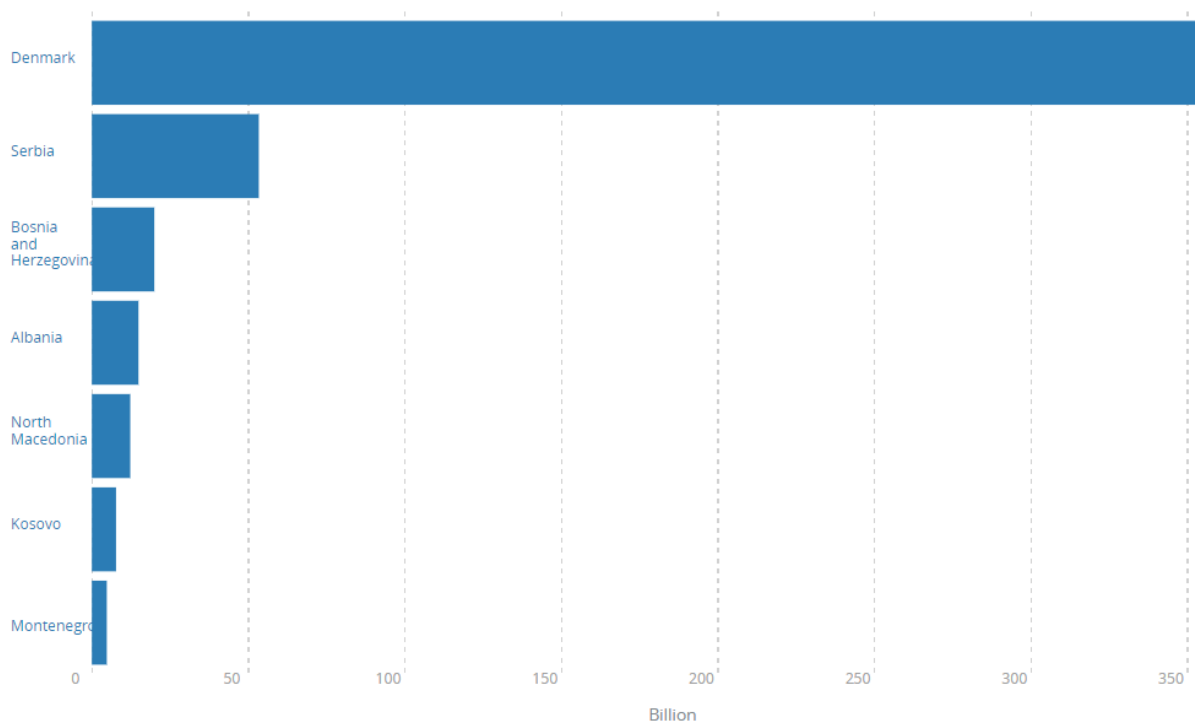
WB6-average: 0,48

WB6 highest score: 0,55 (Kosovo)

WB6 lowest score: 0,35 (Albania)

It must be mentioned that Montenegro is excluded from this dataset.

GDP of the WB6-states with Denmark as a comparison (Data obtained from 'Worldbank.org')



## Appendix 2 (the trade between Serbia/Albania/North Macedonia and China + WB6 and the EU)

Serbia's trade statistics with China and the EU (US dollars)

	2012		2014		2016		2018	
	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU
Imports	1,387.57	11,568.04	1,558.34	12,991.49	1,486.11	11,709.00	2,167.52	15,621.51
Share in total (%)	7.4%	61.3%	7.6%	63.5%	7.7%	61.0%	8.4%	60.5%
Exports	20.26	6,988.71	17.69	9,574.45	26.65	9,835.06	91.73	12,883.71
Share in total (%)	0.2%	61.6%	0.1%	64.7%	0.2%	66.1%	0.5%	70.3%

Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2020 trade statistics

Albania's trade statistics with China and the EU (US dollars)

	2012		2014		2016		2018	
	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU
Imports	310.33	3,088.34	381.93	3,195.77	409.33	2,947.72	537.57	3,906.94
Share in total (%)	6.4%	63.4%	7.2%	60.5%	8.8%	63.2%	8.4%	61.0%
Exports	53.09	1,489.40	83.04	1,882.35	60.03	1,528.39	56.86	2,367.09
Share in total (%)	2.8%	78.1%	3.3%	73.8%	3.1%	77.9%	1.8%	76.4%

Source: IMF trade statistics



## North Macedonia's trade statistics with China and the EU (US dollars)

	2012		2014		2016		2018	
	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU	China	EU
Imports	374.93	3,367.05	433.03	3,739.84	421.23	3,462.15	524.66	4,777.04
Share in total (%)	5.7%	51.3%	5.9%	50.9%	6.2%	51.2%	5.8%	52.8%
Exports	158.85	2,558.19	92.63	3,732.62	47.81	3,766.61	65.23	5,528.31
Share in total (%)	3.9%	62.5%	1.8%	74.0%	1.0%	78.7%	0.9%	80.3%

Source: IMF trade statistics

**Appendix links and data**1. Freedomhouse. 2022. *Countries and territories*. Freedomhouse.org. Accessed March 20, 2022.<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>2. EIU. 2021. *Democracy Index 2021 – The China Challenge*. The Economist intelligence Unit.3. WJP. 2022. *Rule of Law Index*. World Justice Project. Accessed March 20, 2022.<https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>4. World Bank. 2022. *GDP (Current, US\$)*. Accessed March 21, 2022.<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>5. IMF. 2020. *2020 trade statistics*. The International Monetary Fund. Accessed March 21, 2022.<https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>